



1. The night Horseman
2. The Seventh Man
3. Dan Barry's Daughter

MAX BRAND

Dan
Barry's
Daughter



BLACK'S READERS SERVICE COMPANY

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*The characters, places, incidents and situations in this book are imaginary
and have no relation to any person, place or actual happening.*

Dan Barry's Daughter

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CHAPTER I

THE WILD GEESE ARE CALLING—CALLING

SOMETIMES it sounded like the barking of dogs rushing down a trail and closing on their quarry; and again there was a shower of calls like no other sound on earth; and sometimes single voices came dropping, telling wonderfully of distance. So the wild geese came out of darkness, dipping toward the earth, and were lost again in the northern night.

Joan closed her book. Over her shoulder had slipped a heavy braid of dark, metal-gold hair; she put it back with an involuntary gesture, and raised her face, but all she saw were the hewn beams which supported the upper floor of the ranch-house. Darkened by the smoke that had rolled out of the stove on many a winter evening, they still showed every stroke of the ax which had formed them.

If she heard the rustling of the newspaper which Buck Daniels lowered to look at her, she paid no attention to him, not even when he sat up and

watched her with a frown of alarm. For she laid aside her book and went to the window. By pressing close to the pane she could look past the reflection of the room and the high light which the lamp threw in the glass; she could look past this to the shadow of the desert—and she saw, like ghosts, the shining of the stars.

She went outside to the night. She could see far more, now—from the line of cottonwoods by the creek bed to the black rolling of the hills toward the west beyond the house—and it seemed to Joan as though the walls of her mind were pushed back, also.

The stars which she had seen from the window were bright and cold, and still the honking of the wild geese dropped in hurried choruses or lonely single notes. The calling died off toward the north, and she waited through a silence as if for an answer from the earth to those voices from the sky. When it came it was from the cottonwoods, perhaps, but it appeared to be blowing from any corner of the compass—the wailing of a coyote. It quavered and rose.

The back door of the house closed, the screen jingling softly.

“Joan!” called Buck Daniels.

She could not answer at once. It was as though a hand were drawing her back from something beautiful and strange, back to the old, familiar commonplaces of the ranch.

"Joan!" he called again; and this time the sharp note of alarm made her turn quickly.

"Yes, dad," she answered.

He came half running toward her. He caught her by the arm.

"Why didn't you answer up when I called?" he demanded, panting. But he did not wait for an excuse. "Come back into the house," he went on. "Come back out of this darkness—this—"

She went back obediently beside him, but his hand did not loose her arm even while he was opening and closing the door. He did not even free her when they were back in the kitchen-living room of the house; but holding her at arm's length, he studied her as if her face were a page on which strange things might have been written in the last few moments.

"Why didn't you answer when I called you the first time?" he asked again. "Why did you stop? What were you thinking about? Why did you go outside, Joan?"

She looked upon him with a frank wonder. Time and many sorrows had so seamed and weatherbeaten his face that every strong emotion looked like anger; but although his brows beetled and his eyes glared and his lips compressed, she knew that it was fear which had touched him.

Fear of what?

She had no time to ask or to answer, for he went on again:

"You go back to your book. You go right back and sit down there!"

He actually led her to the chair. He drew it closer to the lamp on the table.

"Now, honey," he said, when she was seated with the book in her lap, "ain't you comfortable here? Is the light where you want it?"

She smiled up to him and saw him turn away to his own place. And so a silence came into the room once more, but was no longer like the silence which had preceded it, sleepy, dull, a long drawn period at the end of the day and the beginning of the night. There was a pulse in this quiet, and Joan began to grow aware of tingling nerves to the tips of her fingers.

Buck Daniels spoke again. "Joan—"

She turned toward him and smiled.

"Joan, you ain't happy?"

He was deeply moved by something, for she could see that he had locked his hands together as if to keep the fingers from showing any unsteadiness. And indeed there had been something most unusual about his manner of bringing her into the house and his hurried and broken sentences. It could not come from anything she had done.

While she mused over an answer she heard the rattling of wheels and the rapid beat of horses' hoofs on the road which passed their house not many rods away; and as the noise passed there was a sudden break of laughter—deep laughter of men, and the sweet, singing laughter of girls.

Every voice was like a song to Joan.

"Why do you say that?" she asked. "Why do you say I'm not happy?"

"I'm asking questions, Joan—I ain't stating facts. But tell me true. What you got on your mind, honey?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

He pointed at her a forefinger like the pointing of a gun.

She studied the worn face behind the hand with wonder and tenderness and pity.

"I seen you sitting over your book for fifteen minutes and never turning a page. Does that mean that you ain't got nothing on your mind, Joan?"

"I was just thinking," she said.

"Of what?"

"Of nothing," said Joan, truly feminine.

A flush of anger rose to his cheeks. And she marked the jump of his passions by the quick and hard gripping of his fingers.

"What made you get up and leave the room a while back?" he cross-examined her.

"It was a little warm in here," said Joan.

"Joan, it was so plumb chilly that you wondered if it wouldn't be a good idea to start a fire a while back, and you put on a coat instead."

It was an attack so direct that she changed color a little, and she could only avoid him by suddenly smiling straight in his eyes.

"As a matter of fact, I've forgotten why I wanted to leave the room. There was no reason."

Buck Daniels sighed.

"Have you started in to cover up things from me, Joan? I suppose such things have got to come to every man. The time comes along when his children don't trust him no more. But it's a mighty hard thing to face, honey!"

She was instantly driven to retreat.

"Listen!" she exclaimed.

And far away they heard another faint and dying burst of laughter down the road.

"I never go where other girls go," she said.

"You mean to dances and such like?"

"Yes."

"Wait till you've growed up, Joan."

"I'm eighteen, dad."

He blinked. "What's eighteen? Nothing but a baby!"

She said nothing, but looked him quietly in the face. It was a habit of hers, and the result was that he was invariably upset. After a moment he could not meet her eyes. She herself looked down, for she was rather ashamed of her power over him.

"It's what your mother wanted, Joan. She wanted you to live quiet till you were growed up."

"But when will that be?"

"Maybe when you're twenty."

"Four years ago you said it would be when I was eighteen."

Instead of answering, he changed the subject.

"When you went outside what were you listening to?"

"The wild geese," she answered.

There was something in that answer which lifted him from his chair. He walked hastily across the room, pretended that he had gone to find his pipe, and came back frowning and idling with it.

"And when you heard 'em, Joan—when you heard 'em, what went on inside of you?"

It was her turn to be startled.

"How did you know that?" she breathed.

"Ah, honey," he said with an air of indescribable sadness, "I know more about you than you'd guess at. I know more about you than you know about yourself!"

"Then tell me why I went out to listen to the wild geese!"

He shook his head, and then, drawing his chair closer, he took her hand. She felt the rough, calloused palm stroking her soft skin.

"When folks take their thoughts and lock 'em up inside of their heads," he said gently, "them thoughts begin to get heavier and heavier. Too much silence is a sort of a poison, Joan. What did God give us tongues and throats for except to talk out the things that are bothering us? It won't do no good for me to tell you what's wrong. You got to find your own words and say it in your own

way. And once you've said it, you'll find that you feel a pile easier. Try to tell me, Joan."

Behind that quiet voice she could feel the fear working. What that fear could be of was beyond her guessing. And after a while she said:

"Of course, the geese are nothing. But they're like milestones along a road; they point out a way, you know."

"A way to what—a way to what, Joan?"

"Dad, why are you so excited?"

"Excited? I ain't excited. Only—my God, who ever heard of wild geese as milestones? But go on, Joan."

"I mean that when I hear them crying in the middle of the sky and know that they're going north—"

"Well?" he murmured, as she paused.

"I don't know how it is, but pictures simply tumble into my mind."

"Of what, dear?"

"Of happiness—of a queer, sad happiness—a wonderful, lonely, free happiness."

He passed a hand hurriedly across his face. Then he peered at her again, anxiously, eagerly.

"Pictures of happiness? What sort of pictures, Joan?"

"Why—just what every one thinks about—of mountains, and the big trees, and the wind everywhere, and noises coming down it of all sorts of hunting creatures and creatures that are being hunted—"

"You think of all that?"

"Of course—and a thousand things more. Sometimes, when I listen, I feel as though I were trying to remember something that I'd known before. I don't know just what it is—but I begin to ache with longing, dad. My whole heart begins to ache, you know, to get north and find the place—"

"What place?"

"I don't exactly know. But if I found it I'd recognize it. A place where one would be wonderfully happy. That would be the end of the journey, until—"

"Until what?"

"But in the fall when they fly south—"

He had dropped his face upon his hand, but she was so deep in her thoughts that she did not see. For she was feeling her way forward through an undiscovered country in her mind.

"But in the fall when the days begin to grow shorter and the wild geese fly south, of course, they're pointing to much different things. One can't help thinking of warm winds, and great blue bayous, and reeds as high as one's head around the shores, and flowers even in winter."

"Joan, what put this into your head?"

She looked closely at him now, and she saw enough in his face to make her cry out:

"Why, dad! You're as pale as a ghost! Are you sick?"

"No, no!"

"Is there anything so very wrong in what I've said?"

"No—but—" He paused again, struggling with his explanation. "I once knew a man who found all those things in his head when the wild geese flew over."

"Oh," cried Joan, "tell me about him!"

But he drew himself back from her and exclaimed sharply:

"Never! Never ask me about him!"

"Oh, he was an enemy of yours?" asked Joan.

"He was my dearest friend."

And to the utter wonder of Joan, she saw that tears were in the eyes of Buck Daniels. It was the more mysterious because, so far as she knew, he had no friends. And if he insisted that she lead the life of a hermit on the ranch, seeing no young company, meeting no one indeed, old or young, he led the same life himself, driving to town only for supplies and coming hastily home again.

She had thought of him as a recluse always. Indeed, how he could have met and managed to win the love of her mother she could never imagine. This was opening the book to an unexpected place. This was to find poetry instead of prose.

"But surely," said Joan, "you can tell me about him?"

"You?" cried Buck Daniels, starting from his chair beside her. "Not for the whole world. And

—it's time for you to turn in, Joan. It's your bedtime. Run along."

She hesitated. There was a storm of questions lying locked behind her teeth. But she let them remain unspoken. When this man chose to be silent there was no winning him to speech.

And, besides, he had said enough to make her wish to be alone, so that she could turn all that had happened over and over in her mind. So, after that thoughtful instant, she kissed the bronzed cheek of the big man and went slowly up the stairway, which creaked and groaned beneath her footfalls.

Buck Daniels watched her going with an anguished face, and when she had disappeared he swiftly packed a pipe, lighted it, and went outside to walk up and down, up and down, for a long time. It was the beginning of the end, he felt. And he was filled with a cold and helpless sense of doom.

The tobacco had been long burned to an ash before he finally went inside again. Up the stairs he climbed and paused at the door of the girl.

"Joan!" he called very gently.

There was no answer, and, confident that she was asleep, he went on to his own room. But Joan only waited until his footfall had gone down the hall; then she slipped from her bed.

CHAPTER II

WHERE THE LAW SLEPT

To Hal Springer and Rudy Nichols, the setting of the sun was most welcome for when one has "broken ground" all day, and when the "ground" is hard quartz, fatigue becomes a thing which bites clear to the soul. And, as a matter of fact, they could not have sustained the burden as well as they had done had it not been for certain gleaming little threads of rich yellow in the stone which told them that their labor now meant rest in the days to come.

When they laid aside their double jacks and their drills, however, they did not instantly set about preparing supper. They were too wise for that. For they first sat down on a stone and lighted their pipes. To be sure the twilight would make the cooking of supper more difficult, more unpleasant, but this small interval was refreshing their muscles, their very hearts. They did not even waste strength in words, but from the mountain side they looked out with mild, tired eyes upon the progress of the shadows in the valleys.

They were of an age—perhaps forty-five—and although in body and feature they were as different as men could be, yet their expressions were so similar that they might have been taken for brothers. For each of them had spent twenty years wandering through the mountains, steering a course sighted between the ears of the burro which was driven ahead. They had chipped rocks with their hammers from Canada to Mexico.

Their minds were packed with all manner of information about strange trails and strange adventures, and strange as was their knowledge their hopes were even stranger. Each of them felt that he had rubbed elbows with huge fortunes time and again; each of them kept in the back of his mind precious information about spots where gold *had* to be; each of them had lived so long a solitary life that this association with two others seemed like existence in the midst of a roaring crowd.

The third partner, Harry Gloster, was absent hunting to stock their larder. And his absence was welcome. Not that they disliked him, but they preferred absolute solitude to any human company, and next to absolute solitude it was best to be near one of their own kind, calm, silent, gray as the stone, with eyes worn dull by searching for the spot where the rainbow touches the earth.

They began to hear, now, the sharp sound of shod hoofs striking the rocks below them, a noise which constantly climbed closer. They knew who it was.

As a matter of fact, for the last two hours they had watched the rider working up the valley from far away, the distance diminishing his size although the clear mountain air let them see him distinctly enough.

They had watched him, from time to time, when they came out from the shaft to let the wind blow them cool. But neither had said a word to the other. As a matter of fact, they had not spoken a syllable since Gloster left them early that morning.

But as the noise of the horse came closer, Hal Springer went to the little shack, half cabin and half dugout, in which they bunked, and came back wearing his cartridge belt with revolver dragging the right side of it far down over the hip.

His companion appeared to take not the slightest note of this preparation. He seemed to be only intent upon certain light effects and climbing shadows which were blurring the harsh outlines of a southern peak. But after a dozen puffs of his pipe, he also arose and went to the shack and returned similarly accoutered.

He had barely appeared when the stranger came into view. He had been obscured for some time by the sharp angle of the mountain side, now he was seen to be a fellow in the prime of life, wide shouldered, long-armed, and sitting as lightly in the saddle as if he had not been riding hard through the entire day. He dismounted, throwing his reins,

while the hungry horse, daring not to move, reached in a guilty fashion after a blade of grass which was near its head.

"Hello, Hal," he said. "How's things?"

"Things are tolerable well, Macarthur," said Springer, and he took the hand of the other in a relaxed grip. It was plain that he was not nearly as well pleased to be seen as to see. "This is Rudy Nichols," he said. "Make you known to Joe Macarthur, Rudy."

The two shook hands, but Macarthur swung back to Springer. He wasted no time in preliminary remarks, but went directly to the point, which was what one would expect from his strong features and his steady, bright eyes.

"The damn vein pinched out on me," he said.

There was no response other than a puff of smoke from Springer's pipe.

"Looked like the real thing," went on Macarthur. "Then it faded. Never was worse fooled in my life. Showed the thing to old man Shaughnessy. He said the same thing."

"Too bad," drawled Springer, without interest.

"So your grubstake was throwed away," went on Macarthur.

Springer shrugged his shoulders. He appeared to have found with his glance the same mountain which had so fascinated Nichols a short time before. He studied it as one stares at a picture of dubious merit, making a judgment.

"What I'm up here about," went on Macarthur, smoothly, taking a seat on a rock which enabled him to face Springer, and at the same time sifting some tobacco into a brown cigarette paper, "what I'm up here about is another grubstake."

The silence of Springer was as profound as the silence of the mountains around them.

"I've found the real thing at last," went on Macarthur, as he twisted and licked his cigarette paper. He lighted it and turned his head to watch the match fall. "If I told you all the facts about where and what it was, you'd pack up your things and leave this here hole in the ground and come along with me."

"Maybe," said Springer.

"It's rich!" cried Macarthur with a contagious enthusiasm. "All you got to do is to give the rock one clip with a hammer and you see enough to start you dancing!"

"I've done my dancing," drawled Springer.

"Hal," said Macarthur, leaning forward and speaking in the soft voice of persuasion, "you may have used up a lot of hope on me since that last job didn't pan out, but take this from me: you're a fool if you don't try another try.

"I could of got backing a good many places with a specimen like this to show. But I wanted you to get your money back—and more too. So I come clear up here instead of showing this here ore to Milligan or to one of them other rich gents that

ain't got the guts to gamble on nothing but a sure thing. Take a look!"

He tossed a little fragment of rock to Springer.

"Take a look at your hoss," said Springer.

Macarthur turned. The pony, straying away after a tempting bunch of grass, had been held back by the reins catching on a projecting rock. A strong jerk of the head had broken the head band and allowed the bridle to slip down.

"The darned old fool!" exclaimed Macarthur. "But he'll stand without no bridle at all. What d'you think of that sample, Hal?"

"For a sample," murmured Springer, "it looks like something."

And he tossed it back.

The other pocketed the specimen in silence. His jaw had thrust out and his scowl was black.

"That means you don't give a damn about making your fortune?" he asked.

There was another depressing interval of silence.

"Hal," said Macarthur at last, "don't you believe me?"

There was another little interval of dragging pause in which Nichols discovered something of interest some distance down the slope and rose and sauntered down.

"I don't believe in you," answered Springer at last, with all the deliberation of a matured judgment.

"When I grubstaked you, I was drunk. You got me when I was in town drunk, and you worked on me

until I handed over enough money for you to use as a grubstake, as you called it. That made us come up to this job short of everything that we needed."

Macarthur bit his lip.

"Look at the sample, though," he pleaded, fighting down his passion.

"Samples ain't hard to get. Some buy 'em, and some borrow 'em."

Macarthur arose to his feet. It was too direct an affront.

"Springer," he said, "what d'you mean by that?"

"I mean just this," said the other spelling out the words on his fingers, "I've looked you up, and what I've heard would of made a dog sick. You ain't no good, Macarthur. You skinned me out of one neat little bunch of money. You won't skin me out of another. That's the straight of it. I'm through with your kind. I've heard how you—"

He stopped. Something had happened in Macarthur like a silent explosion. His lips were trembling and his lean face seemed to have swollen.

"You damned old fool!" he whispered.

"Look here—" began Springer, but instead of finishing his sentence, with a gasp which let the pipe fall from between his teeth he reached for his gun.

It glided out of the scabbard with an ease which told of a skill which had at one time, perhaps, been great.

But fast as his movement was, it was like stand-

ing still compared with the flying hand of Macarthur. His gun spoke before the muzzle of Springer's revolver was clear of the leather, and the miner, with a cough, twisted around and slumped over to one side. There was a yell from Rudy Nichols.

"You damned cutthroat!" he was screaming, his voice thrown into a high falsetto by his emotion, and he ran forward, pumping away with his revolver. Not a bullet hummed close to the mark. His aim was so wild that Macarthur raised his own weapon with the calm precision of one firing at a target, and Nichols pitched on his face while his gun rolled and clattered down the slope.

Macarthur waited until the echoes died down. He faced his horse, which had raised its head and was regarding the motionless bodies with a mild interest.

"This is hell," breathed Macarthur. "I didn't mean—"

However, the thing was done, and since it was accomplished only a fool would let a twinge of conscience drive him away before he had reaped the harvest of his crime. He went to the shack, searched it thoroughly, and found a little cash, a ten pound sack of gold which was a prize almost worth the shooting, he decided, and finally he took from the wall a bridle with which to replace his own broken one. In five minutes he was riding down the mountain again.

He paused at the first crossing of the river in the valley. He tied a heavy rock to his bridle and threw it in. After that, how was any human being to tell that he had been there? For not a soul in the world knew to what destination he had been riding that day and certainly the keenest eyes in the world could never trace him over the rocks on which he had been riding.

But before he reached that river, Harry Gloster returned to the mine and he returned leading his horse, which was loaded down with game. He was a poor shot. Practice had never been able to help the skill of the big fellow. But luck had been with him twenty times this day. It had seemed that he could not miss.

He came back, however, to the black and silent cabin, and when he lighted the lantern he carried it out and found the two dead men lying as they had fallen. The lantern shuddered in his hand. First he hurried back to the cabin.

The motive for the double killing was patent at once. For the gold was gone. He went back and carried the dead men to the same spot. And when they lay on their backs with the dirt brushed from their faces, they were wonderfully unchanged from the two he had left that morning.

They must be buried. And he buried them in miner's fashion. He took them to the old shaft which they had begun to dig until the false vein disappeared. At the mouth of the hole he sank a

drill a few inches, wielding a double jack with one hand and raining the blows as if he were swinging a carpenter's hammer, for he was a giant of strength. Then he put in his stick of powder, lighted the fuse, and watched the explosion roll twenty tons of stone across the entrance.

Now for the ride to town! He saddled his horse, the only horse of the three which they pastured near the mine which was capable of bearing his weight. It was not until the saddle was in place that the other thought came to him. Suppose that he rode into town and told them what he had found. They would come pouring out to see the site of the tragedy.

But no sooner were they there than they would begin to ask questions, and those questions would be prompted by the discovery that the mine was paying in rich ore. A rich mine owned by three partners of whom two are suddenly and sadly killed! How fortunate, how extremely fortunate for the third member of the group!

It came sickeningly home to him. He was new to that land. No one knew him. No one would vouch for him. Strangers would compose the jury that tried him. A strange judge would advise them. A furious prosecutor would pour forth his eloquence about this dastardly crime—the murder of two honest, old prospectors!

Sweat stood upon his forehead. Sweat poured out at his armpits. And every mile that he traveled

gave him time for thoughts. The beat of the hoofs of his horse turned into words, and they were the words of the charge of the judge to the jury pointing out all the damning evidence and, in summing up, showing that if such a crime went unpunished it would encourage other men to destroy their partners when a mine began to pay. For how simple was it, in the lonely mountains, to destroy a man, and how easy it was to put the blame upon an unknown stranger and say that one had been out hunting that day!

He went to the town, indeed, but he did not ride into the center of it. Instead, he left his horse at the outskirts, saddle and all. There he paused a moment to rub the nose of the honest mustang and murmur: "They'll find you, old timer. They'll give you some chuck. I know you're hungry as sin!" Then he went on.

He sneaked through the village. He came to the railroad station, and half an hour later he was aboard a freight train and bound for parts farther south.

When the rattling wheels had spun beneath the train for two hours, he dropped off at a place where it had stopped for water. For he must leave a broken trail behind him, he decided, and he was already far, far away from the place of the double murder.

He cut across the country. In the gray of the dawn when day could hardly have been said to

have begun he came to a ranch-house. There, in the barn, he found saddle and bridle. In the corral were a dozen horses.

He picked the stoutest, without regard for lines which might indicate speed, for his first requirement of a horse was the strength to bear up his unusual bulk. On the back of this animal he threw the saddle, lowered the bars, led the horse out, and then rode south, south at a steady jog. It would not do to use too much early speed, for the road was long which led across the desert. But somewhere ahead of him was Mexico, and there, unless men lied, the law sometimes slept.

CHAPTER III

THE CLENCHED FIST

THERE was a fluster in the kitchen of the hotel. The heart of Mary, the waitress, chambermaid and occasionally clerk in the General Merchandise Store, was full. She had to talk. She would have talked to the wall had not the Chinese cook been there.

"He's about that tall," said Mary, reaching high above her head. "He's about that broad. Why, he'd fill that door plumb full. And he's all man, Wu. There he goes now! He's finished washing up and he's going around in front. Look quick through the window—"

But Wu, with a grunt which might have been directed either at the frying steak or at her remark, turned his narrow back upon her and reached for the salt. One glance showed Mary that her confidant was a thing of stone.

So she kneeled on the chair and poured her heart through the window toward the big man. He was not quite as large as she had made him out, but he was big enough. And he was one of those men who carry about them such an air of conscious strength,

such a high headed and frank eyed good nature, that they appear larger than they are.

He carried his hat in his hand, which showed all of a handsome, sunbrowned face. He had taken off his bandanna, also, and opened his shirt at the throat to the evening air. His whole manner was one of utter carelessness, and Mary, when she had peered until he was out of sight, sat down suddenly in the chair with her head thrown back and a foolish little smile upon her lips.

As for Harry Gloster, he paused at the front of the building to laugh at two sweating boys who, in the middle of a great dust cloud, were attempting to drive back a pig which had broken through the fence on the farther side of the street. Then he entered the hotel and went into the dining room.

There was only one other present, and this was a pleasant companion. He was one of those men who show age in the face and not in the body. His shoulders were as wide, his chest as high arched, the carriage of his head as noble as that of any athletic youth.

But his hair was almost a silver-gray and his face was broken and haggard with time and trouble. If his face alone were noted he looked all of sixty. But taking his erect and strong body into consideration, one reduced the age to forty-five. And that must have come close to the truth.

Harry Gloster waved a hand in greeting and sat down beside the other.

"Riding through or living here?" he asked.

"Riding through," answered the older man.
"You?"

"Just blowing north," said Harry Gloster.

"So am I," said the other. "In a rush, as a matter of fact. We might ride on together to-morrow."

Harry Gloster eyed him askance.

"I may be starting in a little while—may not wait for morning," he parried.

He could have sworn that the other smiled, although very faintly. And Gloster leaned suddenly forward and looked his companion squarely in the eyes.

"What's on your mind?" he asked sharply.

The older man hesitated an instant and then laughed. He added, speaking softly: "It's all right, son. But there's no red dirt of that color south of the town. You're just off the Pebbleford trail. You're heading south." The twinkle in his eyes focused to a gleam. "You're for the Rio Grande—*pronto!*"

He spoke just in time to save the heart of Mary from complete wreckage, for at this moment she came in, staggering under the weight of a great tray of food and dishes, yet with her glance fastened on the face of Harry Gloster—who gave her not a look.

To be sure, he had not changed color at the last words of his tablemate; he even managed to maintain a smile, but the big muscles at the base of his

jaw were bulging a little and he stared straight before him. The moment Mary was gone again, however, with a last languishing glance from the door to the kitchen, Gloster touched the arm of the other.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"Nothing," said the older man. "Nothing, except that I don't like to be bluffed." He made a gesture of perfect openness with a bandaged right hand. "You have nothing to fear from me," he added quietly.

At this Harry Gloster grew a little pale.

"What do you know?" he said.

"If I were sheriff," said the other, "I'd lock you up on suspicion and hold you until I'd had a look at your back trail. But I'm not sheriff—not by a considerable distance!"

"Then that's finished?"

"It is!"

They exchanged eloquent glances, and Harry Gloster drew a great breath of relief. Before he could speak again a third man entered the room, stopped short as his glance fell upon Gloster's companion, and then advanced again, slowly, with an indescribable change in his manner and step which told that he was facing danger. As for the man beside Gloster, he, too, had altered, sitting a little straighter in his chair, and with an outthrust of his lower jaw.

Yet he said calmly enough: "Hello, Joe."

"Howdy," nodded the other. "Kind of far south for you, Lee, ain't it?"

"A little far south," answered Lee, while the other drew back a chair with his left hand and sat down slowly, gingerly, never taking his eyes from Lee. He was one of those long legged, long armed men whose weight is condensed almost entirely around herculean shoulders.

He was handsome, in a way, but his features were all overshadowed, as one might say, by the very shadow of his physical strength. It showed in the straight line of his compressed mouth, in the forward jutting of his head, and most significantly in a cruel flare of the nostrils.

"Yes," went on Lee as calmly as before, "I'm a little farther south than usual. I'm *on* a trail. Maybe you could give me a few pointers, Joe."

Joe grinned, and there was no mirth in his smile.

"Sure," he said dryly. "Ain't it nacheral for me to do anything for you that I could?"

Here Mary came to get the order of the new-comer. He snapped a request for ham and eggs at her without moving his eyes from Lee.

"I'm looking for a woman," said Lee, continuing as soon as the girl had left the room.

"We all are," said Joe, grinning again.

"Her name," said Lee, "is Kate Cumberland. That is, it used to be. She's the widow of Dan Barry."

"Never heard of her or him," said Joe.

"Or of Jim Silent?" asked Lee, and it seemed to Harry Gloster that there was a tremor of seriousness in the manner of the speaker.

"Silent? Nope."

"Or you?" asked Lee, glancing earnestly at Gloster.

"Never heard of him. Who was he?"

"I have no luck," said Lee, deep in gloom, and avoiding the direct question. "That trail has gone out!"

The comment of Joe was a grin of cruel disinterest. And Harry Gloster said kindly: "Old friends of yours?"

"Dan Barry—an old friend?" muttered Lee as much to himself as to the others. "I don't know." He sighed and looked across the room with blank eyes. "God knows what he was to me or to any other human being." And he added, sadly: "He was a man I wronged, and he was a man who gave me my life when he had it like that—to take if he wanted it—"

He raised his hand and closed it as though he were crushing an invisible something against his palm.

"Well," said Joe with sinister meaning, "gents like that come few and far between, eh?"

"They do," answered Lee. "There are some folks that hold a small grudge to the end of time. I've met men like that." The meaning could not be misunderstood.

And suddenly Joe turned white. It was not hard to see that a great emotion had been working in him ever since he entered the room. And now it leaped up from his heart and mastered him.

His head lowered and thrust out a bit more than usual; he pushed back his chair somewhat from the table so as to give his knees clearance for quick action. And his right hand dropped patently close to his hip.

"You've met one of them men in me, Haines," he said, breathing hard, and yet growing whiter and whiter as the passion mounted. "I've been thinking and thinking about—you and me. And I'm tolerable glad that we've met up. Tolerable glad!"

And, indeed, the battle lust shook him like a leaf.

Harry Gloster eyed them shrewdly. He had been among fighting men all his life. They were a sort of language which he could read with a perfect fluency.

But as he looked from one to the other of these two he could not tell which was the more formidable. There was more nervous energy in Joe, but in the man who had just been called Haines there was a calm reserve of strength which might be employed in the crisis. He was older, to be sure, but he was not yet old enough to be slow.

There was one determining factor which Gloster could see, but which Joe could not. The right hand of Haines had been kept scrupulously out of sight beneath the table from the moment Joe entered. It

had appeared to Harry at first that this might be from fear lest the other should note his infirmity and take advantage of it to fly at his throat.

But now that the actual danger of battle had become almost unavoidable, there might be another reason which induced Haines to conceal his wound—and that was an indomitable pride which kept him from taking advantage of a weakness to put off a danger. And, in fact, he was now meeting the last outburst of Joe with a calm smile of scorn.

Yet, certainly, he was helpless. The four fingers of his right hand were bound together with one bandage. He could not possibly use a gun under such a handicap unless he were ambidextrous—and on his left side he wore no gun!

To reach across to his right hip would be impossible—opposite him there was a man quivering with hate and with murder in his face. At the first suspicious move he would strike and his stroke would be as devastating as a lightning flash.

“Wait a minute!” cried Gloster. “Wait a minute. will you? My friend here has a bad hand—he can’t —”

“You carry people along to beg off for you?” sneered Joe.

“I’ve never met this man before,” said Haines slowly. “And I need no advice or help. When I fight a rat, I fight alone!”

It came home to Harry Gloster with a sickening surety. It was simply the suicide of a man tired of

life and preferring to die by the hand of another rather than his own. He watched the lip of Joe curl; he saw him take a short breath, as if he were drinking the insult to the last drop, and then there was a convulsive movement of his right arm. The elbow jerked back and up and the big revolver came spinning out of its holster.

Lee Haines had not stirred; indeed, the smile with which he had uttered his last remark was still on his lips. But Harry Gloster had begun to move the split part of a second before the man across the table.

It was a long distance, but the arm of Gloster was a long arm. One foot planted behind him braced his weight. His fist shot across the table with all his bulk in motion behind it. His hip struck the table, tilted it, sent the crockery spilling and crashing to the floor. But before the first cup fell, his fist cracked on the point of the aggressor's jaw.

Had it landed solidly, it would have knocked Joe half the length of the room. But as it was, he flinched back at the last instant, seeing the flying danger from the corner of his eye. So the blow merely grazed the bone and partly stunned him for the fraction of a minute.

He staggered up from his chair and back a step. The revolver dropped down to the tips of his unnerved fingers and hung there by the trigger guard. The very curse which he uttered was blurred and half spoken.

"Keep out of this!" commanded Haines, and reached for the shoulder of his table companion. His grip was strong, but his fingers slipped from a mass of contracted muscles. He might as well have laid an arresting hand on the flank of an avalanche.

Harry Gloster went over the table and landed first with his fist on the face of Joe, and secondly, with his feet on the floor. The half numbed fingers of Joe were gathering the revolver again.

The blow landed in the nick of time and it ended the fight, whirling him about and pitching him into the wall with a force that jarred the room. He slumped loosely back upon the floor.

Mary, brought by the uproar to the door of the kitchen, screamed and ran back, and Wu raised a shrill chattering. Lee Haines was already kneeling beside the fallen man, whom he turned on his back.

"Not even a broken jaw," he said. "He must be made of India rubber." He arose and faced Gloster, and laid his bandaged hand on the shoulder of the other. His calm was amazing to Harry Gloster.

"That was fast work," Haines said, "and it saved me from being filled full of lead, which is bad enough, or begging off, which is worse. But if you're headed for the Rio Grande, don't let this hold you back. And if you come back again, don't come back this way. He's bad medicine, you understand?"

"I've never side-stepped a man yet," Harry Gloster replied, shaking his head.

"You're not too old to form a good habit," Haines rejoined. He scanned the magnificent body of Gloster, and last of all his glance dwelt on the hands. His own fingers, and those of Joe, lying unconscious on the floor, were long, slender, bony—intended for movements of electric speed. But the fingers of Harry Gloster were square-tipped, built for crushing power. "No," he continued, "keep away from him and you'll have better luck. And start moving now!"

There was such a solemn assurance in his voice that it was impossible for Harry Gloster to answer. He looked down again to the long arms of Joe, sprawled across the floor, and to the long fingered, sun blackened hands. And a shudder of instinctive dread passed through Gloster. He turned to speak again to Lee Haines, to learn something of the history and of the accomplishments of this man—of his full name—but Haines was already moving swiftly through the door.

CHAPTER IV

MOON MAD

THE ranch-house in which Buck Daniels and Joan lived was not old, but the parching sun of a few summers had drawn the life from the wood and warped it loose, and a score of wild sandstorms had battered and twisted it. So that a voice sounded from corner to corner of the building and a foot-fall started small murmurs squeaking across the house.

But when Joan arose from her bed it was like the rising of a shadow; there was not even a whispering of the covers as they were laid back. And so gingerly did she trust her weight to the floor that it gave not the slightest sound back to her. And to tell how great a need there was for caution, at that moment Buck Daniels turned in his bed and there was a grinding of the springs as plainly audible as if it had been in Joan's own apartment.

So, for a moment, she stood quietly, thinking and planning and weighing chances, with a hand pressing a hollow into her cheek; and perhaps timidity would have conquered now as it had conquered with

her before had it not been that her window opened to the east and, looking through it across the night, she saw what seemed the rising of a great fire along the black edges of the eastern mountains.

But no forest fire could spread so rapidly, and no forest fire at such a distance could throw such a glow into the upper sky. For that matter, as she very well knew, there were no trees on the mountains—nothing but a wretched scattering of sun-burned brush and spine covered cactus.

Presently an orange rim pushed up, and then grew into a great half circle which framed the ragged heads of three peaks. And then the moon went up until it stood all exposed, resting only on its lower edge upon the very tip of the highest peak. It was pulled out to the sides like puffed cheeks—a blunted ellipse—and it began to gild with gold the white dunes of the desert and at the same time it seemed to pour the dark over the mountains and made them visible with blackness against the eastern sky.

And the light fell fairly through the window upon Joan so that the white of her nightgown, when she looked down, had been changed to a softly shimmering rich color. Or so it seemed to her excited fancy.

She turned her head. She could see the familiar bureau in the corner and the sheen of the glass above it. And yonder was the chair, and there was the table beside her bed, with a misshapen heap of books upon it.

A glittering point of light rested on the knob of

her door; she could almost distinguish the worn and pulpy fabric of the matting upon her floor. And all the dreary sense of poverty and dullness, all the weight of monotonous years in which every day was like its fellow, rolled suddenly upon Joan and made a sigh swell in her throat.

She could not stay. Something was whipping her out. The moon was lifting momentarily high and higher up the sky. And now it lost all sense of weight. It was floating on nothingness and pouring down bright and brighter light.

At least, it gave her light enough for dressing. And when she was dressed—and every move now swift and noiseless—she drifted across the room to the bureau and picked up the hand mirror. When she had brought it back before the window she had to turn it to a particular angle before she could see herself.

Surely it seemed that such a change as she felt in herself must show in the face, but she found no alteration. They were the same girl features. Only her eyes were a little wider and more glistening with eagerness. And something was lacking which she felt in her heart.

She took the long, soft, thick masses of her hair, but instead of twining it swiftly into the usual braids, she began to work it high on her head. It required an infinite number of pins before it would hold, but when she looked again, Joan caught her breath.

Instinct had told her surely what to do. The

change was worked and she felt that she had stepped away from an old self and into a new. She was instantly far older.

She threw the mirror on the bed and crossed to the door. A whole long minute was needed for the turning of that treacherous knob with all its squeaks. But finally the lock clicked back as softly as if muffled in cotton. She stepped into the hall, closed the door with the same caution, and then went on to the stairs.

They were the chief trial. She had never gone either up or down them before without making noise enough to arouse a sleeping regiment. But now there was a wonderful difference. She had grown lighter, so it seemed, and in her very feet there was a guiding intelligence. Without a sound she passed to the bottom and stood in the main downstairs room with a beating heart of triumph.

But still she was not outside. The old atmosphere still clung around her. The odor of Buck Daniels' last pipe still hovering in the air, suffocatingly thick and sweet, and that worn and splintered floor which she had scrubbed so often was full of voices.

They did not waken under her now. That strange lightness of foot was still hers. And all at once it seemed to Joan that all these dead things were her inanimate allies, helping her toward freedom. But where should she go even when she was outside? The night would tell her that. That outer night would lead her!

She was under the stars at last. In the flooding moonshine they were withdrawn to small points of light, for the sky was thick with a haze of radiance. It was all new to her. She had seen it before, no doubt. But now she was looking with new eyes, and the voices of a band of wild geese, dropping in chilly harmony about her, were like so many words, each a message in a foreign tongue and yet with a meaning to be half guessed.

She went out to the barn, found her saddle in the dark, and passed on to the corral. There were a half dozen horses there, but she knew them all. Their silhouettes were as familiar as human faces, although they were crowded in a farther corner.

They snorted and broke apart when she approached them, but when she called to them they halted again. They stood shaking their heads up and down as horses do when instinct tells them that all men are terrible and reason tells them that one man, at least, is kind.

She called again, very softly so that not even the keenest ear could hear from the house, and the horses came slowly toward her, still putting back their ears and making a pretense of biting at one another, as if ashamed of any but compulsory obedience. They gathered in a thick little semicircle before her, their eyes as bright as metal, for the moon was in them.

She had a touch and a word for each of them, as though she needed to give an excuse for her

choice. Pinto was lame, and Bob White was tired after a day's gallop, and Jack had done his share this week, and poor old Mike and Brownie would never do for such work as she had in mind.

"Because where I'm going I don't know—and when I'll come back I don't know—but I think it will be a longer way than I've ever ridden before. So you're the one for me, Peter, dear!"

She rubbed the nose of a shining bay and he stood like a rock while she drew the saddle onto his back, and like a well mannered horse refrained from puffing out his body when she drew the cinches taut. And when the bit, that dread of range horses, appeared under his nose, he opened his teeth for it and pricked his ears as she slipped the headband over them.

One and all, they followed her to the gate. And when she opened it and led Peter out, they crowded against the bars and whinnied softly after her so that she turned her head anxiously toward the house.

Such small sounds, however, could surely never reach the ears of Buck Daniels. But when she swung into the saddle she kept the high spirits of Peter in check and made him walk the first hundred yards. It was not until she was fairly assured that the distance and the soft going would muffle the beating of his hoofs that she loosed the reins, and Peter sprang away at full speed.

Oh, the wind of that wild gallop in her face, and the fences pouring past her as she rode south, and

south! It seemed to Joan for a while that this was all she wanted; when she jumped Peter over a gate and, glancing up, saw the stars blurred above her, she was doubly sure that this was goal enough for her journey.

After all, even Peter, in spite of slender legs made for speed and a great heart of courage, could not race all the night, and when she drew him to a walk, she heard them again—the far-off calling of the wild geese flying north. She stopped the good horse and listened. There was the sound of his breathing, and the faint squeaking of leather as his heaving sides pressed against the cinches; but the crying of the wild geese was very clear overhead, and the strange melancholy and the strange restlessness grew stronger than ever.

She thought back to her talk with Buck Daniels. After all, what she had been able to explain to him had been very little of what was big in her heart. It seemed to her that if her mother, who had died ten years before, had been living now it would have been easier to tell her what she meant.

But even of that she was in doubt. The more clearly she recalled the soft blue eyes and the gentle face of that mother the more certain she was that there would have been no confidant.

No, even her horse knew more. A wedge of the geese streamed black across the face of the moon, and Peter looked up to them with pricking ears. What was going on inside that wise head of his?

She felt that she would have given a treasure to know.

There was a rattle of single-trees not far away and a swift drumming of hoofs. The road was not far behind her, and on this night she wished to be far from roads. The deeper the wilderness into which she could pass, the better.

So she sent Peter away at that matchless gallop, jumped another fence, and was on the very verge of a swale which would shut out all sound from the road when she heard what had thrilled her once before that evening—the high, light laughter of a girl. It was almost inaudible, but even through the distance it trailed like a hand across her heart.

She stopped Peter with a gasping word and listened. There it came again, beautiful as music over water, and wading, fading until it went out. Something had unlocked the soul of that unknown girl and let the laughter out. But the door was still closed in Joan. Indeed, could it ever be opened?

She looked down the hollow to the twisting line of cottonwoods which ran near the dry creek. And beyond the tree tops rolled the moon-whitened dunes, crisply cut against the far shadow of the mountains. Once more the shower of melodious dissonance came drooping from the wild geese in the heart of the sky, and for a strange instant it almost seemed to Joan that the laughter of the girl was falling again, out of the deep bosom of the heavens.

Somewhere in that great world there was a secret

of happiness. And those voices which she had heard traveling down the road, might not they be all bound toward it? She turned Peter and headed him back at a gallop again.

CHAPTER V

THE VENTURESOME MOTH

SHE had ridden three miles to the west when she came suddenly on the place, for as Peter carried her over the top of a dune, she saw the schoolhouse below her with light pouring out of every open window. There were dozens of horses and buckboards tethered near the building and as the dance started at this moment, she heard not only the music, but even the whisper of the many feet across the floor—so plainly did sound travel through the desert night!

It acted strangely upon Joan. She knew that this was the place she sought. She knew it as plainly as if a door had closed upon her and shut her into the midst of happiness. And yet at the same time she was frightened. She could not have kept away from the place any more than if she had been a moth fluttering near a flame, and yet she felt a dread as of fire itself.

She skirted to the side until she reached a little forest of cactus and scrub cedar tall enough to conceal her horse. There she left Peter with the reins thrown and a reassuring pat on his nose. Starting

on again, she became as cautious as when she had stolen about in the ranch-house this night in dread of waking Buck Daniels. And there was need of care, for here and there about the schoolhouse couples were strolling who had danced their fill for the time being, and every couple was a man and a woman.

The heart of Joan beat strangely as she watched them. They walked very near to each other. Their heads were close together. They paused often and, raising their faces in unison, looked up to the moon. It had floated well up in the heavens now, and it looked like a buckler of priceless silver. Around it was spread a halo of color—a rainbow of fantastic delicacy.

Indeed, it was worth looking at, that moon. But Joan, crouched behind a rock and watching with the intentness of a wild cat, studied the faces of two who paused just before her to stare at the sky, and certainly it appeared to her that she had never seen a more foolish expression. Their lips were parted a little and their hands were clasped—he a gaunt fellow, bowed and old with labor even at thirty years, and she big-handed from work and her face parched and thin from the lack of happiness.

What were they murmuring?

"I love you, Margie, dear."

"Oh, Bill—I love you, too!"

They turned away, slowly, and escaped another pair that was coming up.

"Love!" murmured Joan to herself with magnificent scorn. "What stupid things they are?"

She tried to tell herself that she was losing all desire to be inside that schoolroom with its music and its dancers, and yet something held her with a small, sure thread.

Here was another couple. At least they were not gaping at the moon. The girl was so pretty that it made Joan smile with pleasure to see her. And then with a piercing eye she examined the dress of her. There was a peculiar magic in it. It was only a simple pink frock, but it fluffed around the body of the girl like a clinging bit of sun-tinted cloud.

One half expected to look through the mist to the outline of the graceful body. And yet there was nothing immodest.

The man, too, was quite different from that other of the crooked shoulders and the wan face. He was a handsome fellow, arrowy straight, with a pair of level black brows and keen eyes beneath them.

"He'll tell her that he loves her," said Joan to herself. "I hope he does! And what will she do then?"

But their conversation was not at all what she had wished.

"We've gone about far enough," said the girl, coming to a halt and facing her companion so that her profile came into line with the watchful eyes of Joan. "Now, what do you want to say to me?"

"Just what you know I'm going to say!" exclaimed the man.

"Haven't the least idea."

"You have, though. You've broken your promise again!"

"What promise?"

"That you'd stop flirting."

"John Gainer! Besides—I don't know what you mean."

"You *do* though."

"Will you explain?"

"There's Chick Montague been following you all evening like your shadow. You danced with him twice. And he looked plumb foolish while he was dancing!"

"Are you jealous again?"

"Jealous? Of course not! I just want to keep you from being talked about."

"Don't worry about me."

"I say, Nell, you got to stop!"

"What'll make me? When I'm doing nothing wrong—"

"D'you call it nothing wrong when you make every man you dance with figure that you're tired of me and mighty glad that you're rid of me for a while, at least?"

"I've never said that in my life."

"Not in so many words. But words ain't the only things that count. There's a way you got of looking down and looking up sudden and bright at a

gent that knocks 'em flat—and you know it as well as I do. And then you've got a way of smiling at them sort of sad and sweet as if there was something you'd like to tell 'em, if you only could!"

"John, you talk as if I were a—a—I'm not going to say another word to you to-night."

"Then I'll take you home now."

"I won't go a step! I'm having the best time in my life—and you want me to give it up!"

"Nell!"

"Oh!" cried Nell, stamping, "you make me so—"

Suddenly Gainor drew himself up. And Joan trembled with excitement. She wanted to go out and take his arm and say: "Oh, don't speak too quickly! She's meant to do no wrong!"

But, of course, she could only stay where she was and shiver with apprehension as Gainor said coldly: "If you're tired of me, I ain't going to bother you no more, Nell. But we got to have a show-down right here and now!"

What would Nell do now, Joan wondered. What defiance would spring out of her pride? But she was astonished to see Nell throw out her hands in an appealing gesture.

"You're trying to break my heart!" she sobbed.

"Oh, Nell," cried the man softly. "Oh, honey, I'd go through fire to make you happy. Don't you know that?"

And, quite regardless of whoever might be looking, he caught Nell in his arms. It was such an un-

expected ending to the little drama that Joan caught her breath, smiling and nodding in sympathy. She was so glad the breach was healed that she wanted to run out and shake their hands and tell them how happy she was.

"Stop crying, dear," Gainor was saying. "I'm a brute the way I been talking to you. I'd like to get down on my knees and beg your pardon. Please stop crying, Nell, and I'll never talk about flirting again!"

And indeed the whole body of Nell was shaken and quivering. But it was not with sobs. To the utter amazement of Joan, straight toward whom the face of the girl was turned, Nell was laughing, impudently, silently, with her face crushed close to the shoulder of her lover.

"But folks will see us!" Gainor muttered, drawing back.

Nell buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, Nell," groaned the man, "I'll never forgive myself! Will you?"

He thought she was still crying, no doubt. But Joan, shocked and thunderstruck, knew well enough that she was merely hiding the last of her laughter.

Oh, shameless woman, she thought. And her anger arose. Oh, wretched, guileful woman! How she shamed all her sex!

And now they were walking off affectionately arm in arm with the girl looking sadly up at Gainor

and saying: "I only want you to be kind to me, John. Just a little kind to me!"

"Kind to you!" Gainor replied, his voice a great tremor of enthusiasm. "Nell, I'll work for you until my hands are raw. I'll make you happy if I have to—"

His voice faded in the distance. So to the very end Nell had tricked him, using the tears which laughter had brought to her eyes to subdue him. He should be warned, thought Joan; he should certainly be warned about the vixen.

She mused about how it might be done until she was astonished to find herself laughing softly. She checked that laughter at once, only to have it break out again.

"After all," Joan murmured to herself, "she was wonderful! I wonder if any other woman in all the world could do that to a man?"

In the meantime, the music inside the school had swung into the air of a Spanish waltz song whose words she had heard and learned from a cow-puncher who had once worked for Buck Daniels. And the lilt of it entered her blood, irresistibly. She found her hand stirring in the rhythm. Her very pulse was beating to it. It became vitally necessary to her to look once inside that room at the dancers.

She stole around to the farther side of the school. There she found that the way was easy, for the foundation had been laid close to a ragged mass of black rocks. Up these she climbed and at the top

found herself at the level of a window not more than three feet away. And by shifting her head from side to side she could survey the whole room.

But she did not care to shift it, for the instant her glance passed across the room it fell upon the form of a man like a lion compared with the best of all the others—a big, wide shouldered fellow who overflowed the chair he sat on, with a head covered with curling tawny hair thrown back to rest against the wall, and a face half stern and half handsome, and wholly careless of all that went on around him.

Two youngsters of sixteen or seventeen went spinning by in double time, through the mazes of a new dance, and the big man of the tawny hair so far roused himself as to lounge forward in his chair and clap his hands in the swift time of their shuffling feet. But then he leaned back again and ran his eyes negligently over the maze of faces before him as if he found nothing worth a particular examination.

Finally he arose, threw back his shoulders, and stretched himself a little—he loomed a whole head taller than the crowd—and left the hall. Now she could look about to see who else was there. But when she looked she found that she was seeing nothing on every side of her but that handsome bronzed face and the head of tawny hair. And fear, too, had come to her, so that she felt a great desire to be back home and in her bed with the covers drawn tightly around her neck.

What it was she feared she could not tell. But it was something like a child's dread of the lonely dark—filled with unseen faces, and hands that might seize one by surprise, and great voices that might ring at one's ear.

She stole back down the rock. All at once it seemed to her that she had been incredibly bold in adventuring as she had done.

And if Buck Daniels should ever know—

She hurried around the school again. She slipped away into the tangle of cedar and cactus until she reached Peter again, and as he whinnied a welcome no louder than a whisper, she threw her arms around his honest head and drew it close to her.

"Oh, Peter," she murmured, "I've seen such strange things, and I've heard such strange things. Take me home as fast as you can."

But when she had mounted to the saddle, trembling with weakness and fear and haste, her courage returned. For here was Peter under her, and in case of danger she could launch away on his back like an arrow from the string. One dance had ended; another dance was beginning. But its music was nothing. For still the words and the rhythm of the Spanish waltz rang through her head, and, tilting up her face, she began to sing them.

CHAPTER VI

THE GENTLE FLAME

It made no difference that she did not understand the words; that did not lessen her enjoyment of the rhythm.

“Que viva la rumba;
Que viva, que viva placer;
Que vivan las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
Y guapas que saben querer!”

She ended with laughter in her throat.

“Hello!” called a man’s voice, approaching the thicket. “Who’s yonder?”

Joan gathered the reins with a jerk that tensed Peter for a start. But instead of fleeing at once she looked back and saw the figure of a big man striding across the clearing.

Between the heads of two scrub cedars she could see him, and now he crossed a shaft of light which spilled out from a window, and she saw that it was the man of the tawny hair. Indeed, since he was carrying his sombrero in his hand, the light tangled and kindled for an instant in his hair before he stepped on into the next shadow.

"Now, Peter," breathed Joan, "faster than you've ever run before!"

And yet she did not relax her pull on the reins. It was as if her conscious will strove to carry her away and a stronger subconscious power kept her there and made her glance hastily around her.

There was a labyrinth of passages twisting among the shrubs, made doubly baffling by the white light and the black shadows cast by the moon.

And, instead of fleeing, she reined Peter backward into a thick circle of the cedars, sprang to the ground, and took shelter behind a big cactus.

"Hello!" called the voice of the man again. "Who's there?"

"Why are you coming?" asked Joan, and her voice shook with excitement.

"Because I'd walk ten miles and swim a river to see the girl that was singing that old song," he answered. "Just a minute until I get through this cactus—the stuff is like a lot of fish-hooks."

She slipped to the side. He must not come too close to Peter. And from a fresh covert she called softly:

"Who are you?"

"My name is Harry Gloster. What is yours? Hello—where have you gone?"

He had come out on the farther side of the thicket.

"Not far from you," she answered.

He hurried toward her. And in the moonshine he appeared a giant. Back among the cedars she

stole, and that same ability to move like a soundless shadow which had been hers when she was leaving the ranch-house was with her again.

Then she stood fast in the deep shadow of a tall shrub, and saw Gloster blunder past her, sweeping the very spot where she stood, but seeing nothing. It was as if she were wrapped in some fabled cloak of darkness.

And in her heart she wished that she could step out before him. If clever Nell were there, that was what she would have done. But Nell was dressed like a bit of sunset cloud, and Joan was clad in khaki. How could she let him see her, drab as that shadow in which she stood?

And yet, it was hard to leave him, also!

She stepped to the other side of the cedar, peering through its branches, and saw him come running back, then stop in an open space. The moon struck full upon him. He was half laughing and half frowning, and such was his excitement that he still carried his hat in his hand, crushed to a shapeless mass in his fingers.

"Where are you?" he cried again, guarding his voice that it might not penetrate farther than the little copse and to the ears of some strolling couples in the clearing beside the school.

The wind increased at that moment, with a rustling and rushing among the branches, and Joan, pitching her voice far and thin, answered him.

"Here!" she called.

He turned about face.

"The devil," she heard him mutter, "she has wings!" He added aloud: "I won't hunt for you if you don't want me to."

"Do you promise that?" asked Joan.

He faced sharply toward her again, appeared about to make a step in her direction, and checked himself.

"I'll promise if I have to," said Harry Gloster gloomily.

"Then I'll stay a while," she answered. "But why have you come running in here?"

"You know better than I do."

"I haven't the least idea."

"Why do birds sing in the spring?"

"To call a—" She checked herself in confusion.

"That's right!" he laughed. "To call a mate. And when you said in that song that you understood love—"

"The song may have said it. I did not."

"Your whole voice was full of it."

"I know nothing about the tricks my voice may have been playing."

He moved a half step closer.

"Your promise!" she cried.

He retreated again with a sort of groan, and Joan wondered at him. If she had been in his place, strong as a giant and free as the wind, would a single promise have held her back? She decided with a little shudder that it would not.

And, in the meantime, she was studying him intently. She knew little about men. She had seen cow-punchers on the ranch, of course, but Buck Daniels appeared to have a penchant for old and withered fellows who had lost interest in everything except their cigarettes and their stories of their youth. And every one else she had met, with hardly an exception, had been merely in passing.

A thousand times, by hints and direct commands, Buck Daniels had ordered her to pay no attention to men—to young men. And she had obeyed. Sometimes, when it was necessary for her to go into the town, she had felt eyes taking hold on her, but she had never looked back to meet those glances.

It seemed to her now that she was seeing a man for the first time. And what a man he was! How he had stood forth in the schoolhouse dance hall among the crowd! There was power in a simple gesture to have crushed an ordinary man, she felt. And yet at the same time there was a gentleness in him so that his promise could tie up all his strength.

"I'll keep my promise," he was saying, "if you want to hold me to it. But it's sort of hard to talk to a tree, this way."

"I don't see why," Joan murmured. "You can hear me—I can hear you."

"It ain't the words that I mean," he insisted. "They're the least part of a talk."

"What is it made up of, then?"

"The way you turn your head, the way you lift

your eyes, the way you smile or you frown, and the color of your hair, is a pile more important than a hundred words, the best words that ever come out of any one's mouth."

"What color, then, is it?" she asked.

He considered a moment.

"The chief light that I got to see you by," he confessed, "is that song that I heard you singing. And out of that I'd say that your hair is black, and your eyes are black, and your skin is sort of olive with the color under it. Am I right?"

She paused before she could answer. It had been a grievous blow, for some foolish reason, to hear him. Every stroke in the picture had been so utterly unlike the truth that it lay like a weight upon her. What she wanted to do was to step out and show him the truth—but something held her back. For if she showed him the truth, would he not turn his back on her? But if she left him with his illusion, he might carry away his false picture linked up with her real voice, and so for a time she would live in his memory—a sort of ghostly travesty of what she really was.

"Am I right?" he was repeating.

"Yes," she answered, "you're right—that is, in general."

"What does that mean? But I don't care about that. What I want to hear is your name and what I want to see is your face."

She was silent.

"Are you afraid even to tell me your name?" he asked.

Still she did not speak, and she saw him drop his head a little and close his hands.

"Listen to me," he said almost sternly. "If you've run away from your husband and gone gadding to-night—no matter what it is that makes you want to keep it secret, I'll keep that secret on my honor. But let me know enough so that I can find you again!"

She saw the picture in vivid colors—this big fellow coming home to call on her, and Buck Daniels meeting him at the door; terrible Buck Daniels, in whose hands the metal and wood of a revolver became a living thing which could not fail to kill. She had seen him tear to pieces with a bullet a little squirrel sitting up on a limb like a tiny peg. She had seen him do this from a galloping horse. She had seen him casually clip high twigs from trees in order to cut loose and float down to her a nest which she wished to have.

And with that artistry of destruction arrayed against him, all the strength of Harry Gloster would be of no avail. She knew more than this—that sooner than see her become acquainted with a young man, Buck Daniels would pick the quarrel and force the fight. And while all her heart was knocking in her throat, choking her with the desire to speak the truth, she found that fear of Buck was even greater, and she could not say a word.

"I can't tell you," she said.

"But, if you don't, I'll never be able to find you. Yet I *shall* find you, if I have to spend ten years hunting. But, good God—with only your voice to go on! Will you change your mind?"

"I cannot," she cried, half sobbing.

"But you want to! By the Lord, I can feel it in your voice."

"No, no!"

"Will you do one thing for me?"

"All I can, with all my heart."

"My God," cried the big man, "I'd give ten years of my life for one look at you; but if I can't have that, will you sing the song again for me?"

"Why?"

"It's the only clew that I'm going to have. And it ain't much to give away."

"I'll sing it, then."

Twice she tried the opening note, and twice her voice shook away to nothingness and failed her. But then the sound arose very soft and yet clear as a bell ringing:

"Que viva la rumba;
Que viva, que viva placer;
Que vivan las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
Y guapas que saben querer!"

And as she sang she began to move slowly back from behind the shrub, raising her voice in volume

a little as she stole away so that he might not guess her maneuver. Why she should run away so suddenly she was not sure, but she felt a storm of emotions racking her. She was no longer sure of herself. It was not Harry Gloster she feared so much as she feared herself.

And when the last note died away she was only a step from Peter. It was not until that moment that Harry Gloster seemed to realize that she was deserting him.

She heard his voice crying out after her, and then she was lost in a blind panic which made her rush for Peter and then sent her flying away on his back. The sound of his feet over rocks and sand and the panting breath he drew drowned any calling from behind.

A moment later she was out of earshot and, looking back, she saw that she was unpursued.

CHAPTER VII

OUT OF SIGHT

THERE was an excellent reason for that. Harry Gloster had heard her horse break out of the shrubbery and, running to the place, he was in time to see the bay gelding, glistening in the moonshine, darting away at full speed. Even with an equal start he knew that he could not keep in touch with that fugitive. And through a strange country by night it was impossible to trace her.

Yet he was so excited that for a time reason had nothing to do with his actions. He ran a short distance on foot before he realized his folly. Then, standing for another moment, he watched the horse fade into the moon-haze and knew that he had lost her indeed.

The sound of her voice and "*Que viva la rumba*" was all that he had by which to trail her. It would have been better to have had nothing at all. He tried the effect of cold-blooded argument as he turned and walked slowly back. In the first place, he had not seen her face. In the second place he

knew nothing whatever about her. She might be a mere imp of the desert with sunfaded hair and freckles strewn across her nose.

But he found that impulse was breaking through reason again and again. He had heard only her voice, but it was a voice to dream of—low, sweet-toned, gentle—and all the freshness of girlhood was in it. She must be beautiful, he told himself, with such a voice as that.

He was beginning to feel that an ugly fate had hold of him in this country. In the first place, there had been that singular meeting with a man whose eyes had such power that they had pierced through and through him and got quite at the heart of his story. He was fleeing for the Rio Grande and if he was caught the chances were considerably more than three out of four that he would be swung from the gallows for having shortened the life of a fellow man.

Lee Haines had looked him through and through, and for that very reason he should have started south again as fast as a staggeringly weary horse could take him. But he had lingered until he was drawn into battle again, and in that fight he had made a mortal enemy of Joe. Joe Macarthur he had learned that the man's name was, and Haines had understated the formidable character of the fellow.

Now, then, that one man had discovered that he was a fugitive and that another was on his trail to

"get" him, certainly he had reasons enough for wishing to leave the town at a full gallop. But he had deliberately lingered, jogging only a mile or two south and then making a detour.

Joe Macarthur would thunder south along the trail which a dozen people could point out to him. Let him go! Harry Gloster would start later and by a different route. For he had no desire to meet a man who was a professional in the use of a gun.

He himself could occasionally hit a target—if it were large enough and he had time enough to aim with care, but this magic of swift drawing and murderous straight shooting combined was quite beyond him. Fighting for its own sake he loved with a passionate devotion.

But to face a gunman would be suicide. So he had lingered in the town until the dark, and then he started forth leisurely on a trail that ran south and west. So it was that he came to the lighted school-house. Twice he rode by it, and twice he turned and came back to listen to the gusts of young voices and to the bursts of the music. All common sense told him to be off and away. But it was a year since he had danced, and Harry Gloster was young.

So he went inside the school, but once inside he regretted his step more than ever. Something had died in him, so it seemed, during that last year. The music was flat; not a smile which his great size and his handsome face won for him penetrated his armor of indifference, and after he had spent fifteen minutes

in the hall he got up and left. He was on his way to his horse when he heard

“Que viva la rumba,
Que viva, que viva placer—”

ring sweet and thin from the thicket.

And now he was coming back toward his horse with the solemn realization that there would be no shelter for him below the Rio Grande. For, sooner or later, he must come back to find the trail of this nameless girl, and when he returned he would be placing his head in the lion's mouth of the law. But he knew himself too well to dream that he could hold out long against the temptation.

He paused again on his way to the horse. The music had a different meaning, now. His pulse was quick. His blood was hot. And there was a tingle of uneasiness which ran from hand to foot. Had he known that Joe Macarthur himself was in that dance hall, he would have entered again and taken his chance, which was not a chance at all.

Up the steps he went, and into the hurly-burly of a dance which was just beginning. He was too late to get a partner. As usual, there were three men for every two girls at this Western dance. Every girl was swept up in half a minute after a dance began, and still there were men along the walls and smoking on the steps.

Harry Gloster went to the orchestra. It consisted

of a drummer, a cornetist, a violinist, and an individual playing a braying trombone which from time to time shook the whole place with its thunder. Into the hand of the violinist Harry Gloster slipped a five dollar bill.

"Switch back to '*Que viva la rumba*' when you get a chance," he said, and walked hurriedly away; for if he had stayed the old musician would doubtless have had pride enough to refuse the money. It was a tag dance which he was watching, a queer institution installed particularly for merrymakings in which there was a shortage of girls. Once the dance was under way the men from the sides worked onto the floor and touched the arms of those who were dancing with the girls of their choice. And so there was, perforce, a change of partners, and many a girl found herself whirling away in the arms of a man she had never known before.

Harry Gloster, from the side, watched the jumble of interweaving forms—saw the vain effort of dancing couples to elude the approach of the taggers—heard the uproar of laughter which almost drowned the strain of the waltz. There was a brief pause in the music, then the orchestra struck into the pleasant rhythm of "*Que viva la rumba*," and the dance, which had hardly paused, started again more wildly than ever.

Gloster, searching the faces, felt that they had been transformed. That old touch of magic which he had felt in his boyhood, now had returned. Yon-

der in the moonshine he had been touched by the wand and poured full of the enchantment. And he knew it well enough. But so long as the illusion lasted, why should he give up the happiness? One dance, then away for the border!

How should he choose? They all appeared delightful enough to him now. Their smiles were like glimpses of blue sky after storm, and their bodies seemed floating and whirling lightly on the stream of the music. Yonder one with red hair was tagged so often that she was repeatedly whirling from the arms of one man to another, and yet her laughter never stopped? Should he touch her arm?

And there was another, slender, joyous—who changed partners often enough, but never lost her step. And here was a third with great, brown eyes and brown hair coiled low on her neck and dressed in a clinging mist of a gown like a sunset-tinted bit of cloud—

Instantly Harry Gloster was through the press, moving with wonderful lightness for so large a man. He touched the arm of the man who danced with that pink-clad vision, and received a stare of surprise from under level black brows.

"Next time around, Nell," said he, stepping slowly back and still keeping his glance fixed upon Gloster.

"All right, John," she answered, and then was away in the arms of Gloster.

"Nobody was tagging you," he said.

"No," she answered, demurely.

"Why not? Engaged to friend John?"

"Maybe," she answered, without raising her eyes. But Harry Gloster only laughed.

"I've broken the ice for you, then. Here comes a couple to get you. Shall I let them have you?"

And at this, finally, she looked up. They were great brown eyes, indeed, and filled with an almost too perfect meekness.

"Can you help it?" she asked.

"Say the word and I'll show you the trick."

Some of the meekness left her eyes and a glimmer of mischief took its place.

"If you can—" she said.

It was done with miraculous skill. A slight increase in their speed—they whirled toward one prospective and eager-faced tagger, then away from his reaching fingertips—then toward the other, and away again, like a leaf which wind currents throw up and down, suddenly, but never with jar or jerk.

"How in the world did you do it?" she was laughing up to him.

He drank in that laughter, frankly, meeting her eyes as he had never met the eyes of any woman before. What did it matter? She was only a ghost. The reality was far away, fleeing through the haze of moonshine.

"You're going to forget John—for this one dance," he commanded. "You're engaged to me, understand—for five minutes!"

"What do you mean?" gasped Nell.

"You know what I mean."

He dodged an aggressive tagger and then sped on.

"If John doesn't get me," she was saying, "on this round, he'll be furious."

"It does John good to be furious," answered Gloster. "We're too happy to be bothered."

"We?"

"You are or will be. I'm happy enough to make up for two. It's overflowing. D'you feel it come out of my fingertips at your back, like electricity?"

Her eyes were frightened, but her lips were smiling.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking you with me. For five minutes, you understand? Going to see how much action we can crowd into that time—"

"And after that—"

"I'm going away. Never see you again!"

"You're not like other people," she said almost wistfully.

"Not a bit. Here's John again! Dance faster. Longer steps! We're going to dodge him if you help—"

And help she did. She became as light as that whirling leaf he had thought of before. It seemed that his mere volition was guiding her.

"The devil!" muttered Harry Gloster. "Someone tagged me then. But we're going on—"

"Oh, there'll be trouble about it. It's the rule!"

"D'you care about rules?"

"Not the least in the world!"

She had caught the fire at last. A rioting carelessness was in her eyes.

"There's another hand at my shoulder!"

They had swerved deftly away, but John had apparently been watching the previous tactics of this big stranger, and his hand touched Gloster. But Gloster danced on, with the girl in his arms.

"What will happen? What will they do?" the girl was breathing close to his face.

"That's for them to worry about. This dance is *ours!*"

He drew her a little closer.

"I feel your heart keeping time—with the music," he whispered.

"You mustn't look at me like that!"

"Why not?"

"They'll know what you're saying—"

"They'll only wish they'd said it first—"

"And John will be wild—"

"The wilder he is to-night, the tamer he'll be to-morrow! By the Lord, you're too wonderful to be true!"

"I won't listen to you!"

"Close your ears to me, then, and listen to the music. D'you hear it?"

"Que viva la rumba;

Que viva, que viva placer;

Que vivan las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
Y guapas que saben querer!"

"It's talking for me, Nell!"

"There! You were tagged again!"

"What do I care?"

"Oh, everyone is looking at us!"

"Let them look. You're worth seeing, Nell!"

"They'll fight you about this."

"Do you mind being fought for? I'd like to fight for you, Nell. There's John again—but this time we've dodged him. But look at them coming! A dozen ready to tag me. Nell, you're a popular girl! Confound them, they won't have you yet!"

"Please!"

"Please what? Do you want me to let you go?"

"I—I—no!" She pressed a little closer to him.

"Don't let them take me!"

"Que viva la rumba,
Que viva, que viva placer—"

He sang it in a ringing bass.

"Every person is looking at you!"

"No—at you, Nell. Two minutes out of my five are left. I'm going to have you to myself that long!"

"What are you going to do?"

"Take you out of this place before they tag me with a club."

"Take me where?"

"Outside. We're going to sit on the moonlight side of a tree, and I'm going to make love to you, Nell, as you were never made love to before."

"Do you think I've gone mad? I won't go a step with you!"

"Hush, Nell. I know that you trust me."

"Not a bit."

"Look me in the eye when you say that."

She flushed gloriously and her eye wavered under his glance.

"You're a dear, Nell. But I want to have you where it's quiet to tell you just how dear you are. When we get to the end of the hall, out through the door we go together. You understand?"

"Yes—no! Of course I won't go."

"I won't try to make you. Tell me for the last time? You're going to hear me? Only for two minutes, and then I'm gone!"

"Oh!" cried she. "My head is swimming!"

"With the music!"

"I'll go. I don't care what they say!"

"Nor I what they do."

They reached the end of the hall, swung deftly through the outer line of the dancers, and were suddenly through the door, leaving a gasp of wonder behind them. They stood at the head of the steps, worn and hollowed by the scraping feet of school children. Before them was the moonlight world.

CHAPTER VIII

AN OUTLANDER OFFENDS

THERE was no lack of brains behind the level black brows of John Gainor. His temper was as eager and as sanguinary as that of any man, but he was possessed of a controlling discretion. When, after having tagged Gloster, he saw the big man dance serenely on, his first impulse was to jump at his throat and tear him away. But the very size of Harry Gloster was enough to make Gainor doubly thoughtful.

So, instead of acting on the first rash impulse, he stepped back to consider the situation again. Had it been the first time that Nell had stepped from the conventional path, passion might have carried him away, but he had watched her flirting a dozen times, and this was simply the old story retold, he decided. It would not do to make himself ridiculous before the crowd.

Again, he was by no means sure how far he could go with Nell. Whether she was in love with him or with his father's ranch he had never been quite able to make up his mind. On occasion he presumed

on the rights of being her fiancé, but those occasions were few and far between. That same night he had already laid down the law to her, and she had submitted, as he thought, with tears.

So far, so good. But if he tempted her again, might she not fling away from him and wreck all his hopes with a single fiery sentence? He knew her well enough to feel the danger. And this, plus the physical dimensions of Harry Gloster, made him pause to consider.

In another moment he was glad that he had delayed, for Gloster was tagged by half a dozen other men, and yet still went serenely on and showed not the slightest intention of abandoning his partner. It was not Gainor alone who had been insulted, but a whole group of men, and every one of them was on fire with rage. Moreover, they were not fellows to lie down under such an insult. Indeed, Gainor could not have named a more formidable group of cow-punchers, selected at random, than Bud Lane and Lefty Wallace and the others who had just been offended.

In fact, they were such men that he could not imagine what had let Nell permit her partner to offend them. For Gainor knew that, no matter how willful and careless and emotional Nell might seem, at heart she was a profound little diplomat, and only gave offense to-day that she might be the more gracious to the offended to-morrow. She had been worshipped by a score of admirers in her time,

and although they were without hope to-day, they still continued to worship.

Something most extraordinary must have happened to sweep Nell off her feet in such a fashion. He studied her with a painful anxiety and closeness. What he saw was that there were ample grounds for fear. For Nell was transformed and radiant in the arms of this big man. She leaned back in them and looked up to him with laughter on her lips. She was so enchanting that the heart of John Gainor throbbed.

But still he took no hasty steps. It was not until he saw the couple swing off the dance floor at the end of the hall and disappear through the door that he began to act on the offensive.

The whole room was buzzing with it. The orchestra labored in vain at the animated strains of "*Que viva la rumba*," for the dancers were lagging at their work and busily exchanging murmurs and glances. On the farther side of the room the half dozen men who had been directly insulted by Glosster had gathered in a close group. And for these John Gainor made. The ground was plowed. He had only to drop the seed with a few words.

"What shall I do, boys?" he asked. "Take this for a joke, or go out and tear into that fellow? What's his name? Who is he? Friend of any of you?"

"Slick stranger!" said big Bud Lane. He was one of those blond, gentle giants who do not know

fear, but who are rarely kindled to anger. It took a long time for rage to penetrate to the farthest corners of his being; but this was one of the exceptions. "That gent ain't one that works with friends. He plays a lone hand. And if it wasn't for Nell, I'd go out and bust his head wide open for him."

"That's it," nodded Gainor sadly. "I don't want to offend Nell. I dunno what happened. He must 've hypnotized her."

"That's what he done. I seen how fast he was talking," put in Lefty. "There ain't any honest man that can talk as fast as he was talking. A gent don't get thoughts that quick."

"I'm going out to have a look at him," declared Gainor.

"I'm coming along," said Bud.

And the rest, with a resolute clamor, crowded along, while a hush fell over the dancers and the orchestra increased its pace to rush the piece to its close.

Outside passed that little impromptu posse.

"Mind you, boys," said Gainor, "no guns!"

He would be held up as the ringleader of that group and if serious harm came to Gloster he would be made to account for it.

"It's fists!" rumbled Bud Lane. "I don't want a gun. I just want to set my hands on him—"

And he stretched out his big fists. Gainor looked upon him with vast approval. He recalled having

seen Bud pull over two strong men in a tug-of-war. He had seen him throw up a three-hundred-pound bale of hay "four high" with the hooks.

And the story of how Bud Lane wrecked Murphy's place when he was short changed there was a tale of Homeric qualities. Every year the story was told and every year it grew a little, perhaps, but the sheriff himself was witness to the final picture of five men piled crisscross in the center of the wreckage on Murphy's floor with Bud Lane sitting on top of them and rolling a cigarette. Gainor remembered that tale, and he moistened his dry lips.

But where were Nell and the stranger?

The "posse" passed to the foot of the steps and went by the sheriff himself. He was sitting on a stump smoking, and he grinned at them in a friendly fashion which plainly bade them go as far as they liked. For the sheriff was a wise man and he knew the difference between a duty done and a vote lost.

"We're all right, boys," declared Gainor as they went on. "Sim Hargess passed me the wink. We can go the limit with the big stranger!"

"There they are!" whispered some one.

And to the shocked and astonished eyes of John Gainor there was revealed the following picture. Beneath a tree not twenty yards away sat Nell and the stranger, brazenly facing toward the moon, and that cruelly clear white light showed them leaning close together—mortally close.

It could not be, and yet it indubitably was true,

that the arm of the big man was around Nell, and that her head was back against his shoulder, and that she was faintly smiling up to him with eyes half closed. A sword of fire was struck through the heart of Gainor. The big man leaned. His head of tawny, shaggy hair obscured the face of the girl. He had kissed her!

John Gainor found himself walking alone toward the place. He had covered half the distance before the first swirl of rage abated. And he slackened his pace so that the others might catch up with him. They paused a short distance away as Gainor stepped forward again and stood before the guilty pair.

Nell sat up with a little cry. Hypnotism it surely had been. She looked around her with bewildered unseeing eyes, and then suddenly threw her hands before her face.

But Harry Gloster arose leisurely and faced the other. After all, he was not so tall. He seemed much larger than he was considered by himself. In cold fact, when compared with another, he was hardly more than six feet. John Gainor thrilled with surprise to find that he was looking almost level into the eyes of the stranger.

"I—we've come out to have a little talk with you," he declared.

"I'm a busy man," said Harry Gloster, shamelessly. "But go ahead and do the talking."

Gainor bit his lip. It was a rare thing for his father's son to be talked to in this fashion.

"Most like," he said, "you ain't been to many dances?"

"Considerable some," admitted Gloster.

"Which you don't seem to know what's manners on a dance floor."

Harry Gloster sighed.

"Son," he said, "I'm a plumb peaceful man. Are you trying to pick trouble with me?"

"We're looking for an apology," said John, more mildly. "You've insulted six of us here."

"I hate apologies," said Gloster easily. "I sure hate 'em."

"The damned pup!" exploded a voice from the background. "Lemme talk to him!"

"Did I hear you cussing out me?" asked Harry Gloster, smiling.

"You sure did!" cried Andrews, pressing to the fore. "And, what's more—"

He proceeded no farther, for he was struck down by something as inescapable as a lightning flash. It is the instinct of a fighting man to lean back and start his fist far behind him so that it flies through a wide arc and it is seen coming far away.

But now and again one comes upon warriors who understand the value of the jab. The jab, strictly speaking, is not a movement of the arm. It is a jerk of the entire body, a convulsive twist of muscles which shoots the whole mass from head to foot into motion.

The arm is simply made into a rigid part of the

body and the fist is the focal point which strikes the enemy. The whole distance the striking fist covers is short. Perhaps it only travels six inches. But the effect is astounding.

Imagine, for instance, a hundred and fifty pound cube of iron lifted six inches from the floor and allowed to drop. The shock makes the floor quake. Now supply the iron mass with a projecting knob with a surface of a few square inches and let the mass fall again. This time, if it does not break the flooring with the concentrated impact, it will at least grind deep into the solid wood. Such is the jab.

With feet braced and fist extended and arm made rigid, the body is suddenly twisted and the blow darts home. Amateurs never use it unless they are possessed of an inborn genius. Even in the professional ring there are few, wonderfully few, adepts. But now and then, as the gladiators come together in the middle of the ring, it is seen that one of them, without an apparent blow having been struck, shudders from head to foot and suddenly collapses inert along the floor.

There is no use waiting for the count. Rubbing and water and care will bring back his senses in five minutes or more. What has struck him, then? Dismiss all doubt. It is the jab which has been used.

Or perhaps there is a variation. Instead of striking straight with rigid forearm, the fighter twists his fist and jerks it in and down a trifle. The result is hardly less of a shock combined with a

tearing jar which, if the blow lands on the side, almost rips the flesh from the ribs, and if it strikes on the jaw converts a man's muscles into water and lets him flow to the floor a stunned, senseless thing.

From which it might be judged that all fighters would use this blow. But that is not the case for two reasons. A long, straight punch or a sweeping swing is so terrible to the eye, so impressive to the imagination, that it is an undying temptation. But the chief reason that the jab is not popular is that so few can use it, unless the word is applied to its distant cousin, the stiff armed, long distance left jab. And the reason it cannot be used by most is that it requires a sort of explosion of nerve energy, a tensing of muscles until they become rock, so that the striking is like the leap of an electric spark.

All this has been said to explain what happened to Andrews. For to every one, including himself, it afterward seemed a miracle. He had floundered in close to Harry Gloster with his fist ready. He was a big man, was Andrews. He was not a giant like Bud Lane, but he was fully the equal in mass of Harry Gloster.

Suddenly he was struck to the earth and lay writhing, unable to groan, his arms wrapped around his ribs, his mouth gasping and his teeth biting at the air which he could not get. And all that had happened to account for this catastrophe had been a slight twitch of the body and shoulder of Gloster.

He now stepped over the prostrate Andrews and

faced John Gainer. Gainer did not like fighting because even money cannot avoid wounds. Nevertheless, he was not a coward. And if ever a man had reason to fight well, he had it.

Yonder sat his lady in the light of the moon, entranced with terror and wonder—with perhaps a primitive dash of delight to see herself fought for. And around Gainer, with a rush, came five hard fighting men. So John Gainer put all his might behind his fists and drove them at the head of the other.

The blows plunged through thinnest air. Harry Gloster had stepped with amazing lightness to the side and now another light dancing step brought him close in. His feet were firm planted, his body loose. Suddenly it contracted. Body and head jerked stiffly halfway round and a bony fist jarred against Gainer's jaw.

John threw up his arms, left his feet, described a perfect half circle, and landed on the back of his neck, his full length away from the spot where he had stood. It had not been like the striking of a blow. It was rather an explosion of dynamite. Flesh could not resist.

To the honor of the other five, be it said that they would never have imposed such odds upon any man, no matter what a villain. But they had no choice. They were assailed by a dodging tornado, so to speak. They saw before them a solid bulk of two hundred pounds.

They struck at the midst of that bulk, and their fists either bit the air or else glanced from a raised shoulder or a brawny arm. And in return they received a machine gun fire of blows which were like the hammer of a double jack against the steel drill head.

No swinging punches which could be blocked in the distance or avoided, but short, sharp hammer strokes came home against them. If a man happened to be firmly planted, he went down to rise no more for some minutes. If he was recoiling from the attack, he was merely half stunned. There was a brief swirl.

When Harry Gloster stepped out of it, two more men were down. And of the other three, two were gaping and wild eyed. Only big Bud Lane had not been touched.

At him drove Harry Gloster, high on his toes with little swift dancing steps so that he seemed to float over the ground. But the other two threw themselves between.

A piston thrust of the left hand and one went down with a gasp. A jerk of the right and stalwart Lefty crashed at the very feet of Bud Lane.

But the battle now had swept to the grip of Bud himself. He was no dancing fighter. He did his best work with the foeman inside his arms, and that was where Harry Gloster found himself.

He had not time to strike again. A semi-jab landed on Bud's ribs and felt to him as if he had

grazed a projecting knob of granite. But the pain merely made him exert himself, and when he exerted himself he was irresistible.

Gathered in that bear hug, Gloster swayed a moment and then they went down together. It was what Bud wanted. He had wrestled all his life, and on the ground he was perfectly at home. Lying flat on his back he was still as formidable as a mountain lion.

He reached for a half nelson as they were falling, got it, told himself that the glory was his—and then found that his hand had slipped off. Gloster had “shelled” his head between the outthrust of his big shoulders.

There was a whirlwind activity under Bud Lane. He felt as if he were lying on six small men instead of one big one. And no matter where he reached he could not secure a grip. Suddenly the victim was away. A voice was calling joyously above Bud: “All right, partner. Another whirl—best time I’ve had in ten years—”

Bud Lane sat up, dazed and unhappy with wonder, and at that moment he saw the sheriff himself step into view with the long and glistening form of a six-shooter in his hand.

“Son,” he said to Gloster, “you’ve had a nice little party out here. I figure that maybe I’d better take you to town where you can have a nice little rest! This is after sunset and I sure enough hate to see a gent working overtime!”

CHAPTER IX

"QUE VIVA LA RUMBA"

THE fear which drove Joan lasted well-nigh until she had reached the house of Buck Daniels. Then it disappeared, only to be replaced by another dread. What if he should know that she had left the house?

However, that was a bridge that must be crossed when she came to it. She brought Peter back to his corral, and unsaddled him by pauses, her mind was so filled with other things.

But she recalled the necessities of the moment enough to scatter earth over Peter's sweating body. In the morning it would look as if he had simply rolled, during the night, near the water hole at the farther end of the corral, and no one who did not look very close would distinguish the sweat marks.

When she had done this she went back toward the house. It had been a very futile and foolish thing, she felt, this ride through the darkness, and, above all, the talk with Harry Gloster. And yet, somehow, she was returning richer than when she had started.

She entered the house and went through it with

the same ghostly silence, and again, as she climbed the stairs, there was not a sound underfoot. But when she opened the door to her room she saw the broad outline of a man's shoulders against the stars beyond her window. It stopped her with a shock of fear, but the gentle voice of Buck Daniels spoke immediately.

"Joan?"

"Yes."

"I'll light the lamp."

His voice was perfectly quiet and half of her fear died away until she watched his hand as he held the match to the wick of the lamp, for that hand was trembling. And a sudden concern for him swallowed her terror.

She had expected that he would raise the lamp and stare at her by its light. And if he did so it seemed to Joan that he could not help but see much that was newly written in her face.

But, although the language of Buck was not polished nor his manners either, he was full of a native gentleness. It never had showed more than at present as he went back to his chair, sat down, and rolled a cigarette, his eyes never lifted to Joan.

It was as if he bade her rally herself for the ordeal; it was like a declaration that he would not spy upon her mind. And when at length he raised his glance to her, it was with an effort that crossed his forehead with wrinkles of pain.

"Joan, dear—" he said, and stopped.

She wanted to run to him and fall on her knees by his chair. She wanted to throw her arms around him and pour out the whole story of everything that had happened since she last saw him. But the thing which had held her back like a hand more than once before held her back now.

“Have you been doing this much?” he asked at last.

She shook her head. “Never before.”

“Never?”

She nodded.

He went on smoking and watching her steadfastly until he had finished his cigarette, and then he said, suddenly: “Here you are standing and me sitting down!” And he started to his feet.

“Dad!” she cried, tears rushing into her eyes. “After you’ve worked all the day and then waited up for me so many hours to-night?”

She curled up on the bed with her elbow on the footboard. That brought her face perilously close to him. He would be able to watch and estimate every alteration of her expression. Nevertheless, there she sat.

It seemed to her that he would never begin. She would much rather have faced an outburst of extravagant anger and yet more extravagant threats and commands. But she felt rather helpless in the face of this working soul of Buck Daniels. He went forward slowly, with a weight of grief and anxiety weighing him down.

"Joan," he said at last, "I guess I've made you pretty unhappy here."

"Oh, no!"

He shook his head.

"That means 'yes.' Well, I ain't very entertaining, and you're pretty young. Maybe you'll be glad to know that we're going to leave the ranch pretty soon?"

"Leave the ranch?"

"I got an offer a while back. I think I'll take it."

"That offer from Mr. Calkett?"

"That's the one."

"But you said that was terribly small?"

"It's large enough. It'll do to move us."

"But where, dad?"

"East."

"East!"

"To some city. Maybe to New York."

"Oh, do you mean that?"

"That'd make you happy, Joan?"

"Oh, yes!"

He sighed.

"But what about you, dad? What would you do away from the mountains and the desert?"

"Man of my age gets on mostly any place."

"Dad, it would be only for my sake! But because I take a ride by night, why should we have to leave the country?"

"Will you tell me where you went, Joan?"

"I can't do that."

She watched his face turn gray, although he said not a word.

“I want to tell you, dad—but something—”

“Joan, something has happened between us. It’s been a couple of years since you’ve changed toward me. What is it?”

“Nothing,” she said stanchly.

“Tell me the true of it, Joan.”

She shook her head again, and as she did so she heard a voice come clear and small across the night from the direction of the road—a voice full of quavers such as are thrown into singing by the jolting of a buckboard. And the song he sang was:

“Que viva la rumba;
Que viva, que viva placer;
Que vivan las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
Y guapas que saben querer!”

It brought her to her feet, trembling, listening with her soul in her face. And as the voice faded out with a swiftness which spoke eloquently of the speed with which the singer was traveling, Joan looked down to Buck and knew that he had seen enough.

“You’ve been seeing a man!” he cried. “My God, is that it?”

His horror was so strong that she went a little back from him.

"Why shouldn't I see a man?" she asked.

"Who is it?" groaned Buck Daniels in a sort of ecstasy of rage and grief. "What's his name?"

She shook her head. It was a very wonderful thing to see Buck so perturbed. She could never have imagined it. But watching him now, she knew that he was a man capable of violence. He was beginning to walk up and down the room, pausing sharply now and again, and then walking on once more with his fingers working and a wedge of muscle thrusting out from the base of his jaw.

"When did you first meet him?" he asked at length.

"To-night," she answered.

"Don't tell that lie to me!" he thundered. "This gent has turned your head. Want me to think that he did it at one meeting? No, you ain't *plumb* crazy, and don't think that *I'm* crazy, too."

She had never heard such words from him before; she had never dreamed that he was even capable of uttering them. But she made no reply, merely sitting quietly and staring into his excited face.

"Talk, talk!" he commanded. "Lemme hear what you got to say for yourself!"

She shook her head; and this denial threw him into such a frenzy that she was almost afraid, for the moment, that he was going to strike her. It was not really fear that she felt, however, so much as a sad marveling at these passions in him.

"What was the song that I heard somebody sing-

ing a while ago on the road—the one that made you jump up to listen?”

She hesitated. But as she wavered, doubtful, so many things came back upon her mind out of that strange and happy night, that the song began to swell in her throat of her own accord. And so it came out, in the end, clear ringing, but small as the whistle of a bird:

“Que viva la rumba;
Que viva, que viva placer;
Que vivan las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
Y guapas que saben querer!”

He greeted this quiet little ditty with a growl of disapproval.

“I dunno that lingo,” he declared, “and I’m glad that I don’t. No good never come out of it. What’s that song about?”

She hesitated. When one thought of the actual translation of the words, syllable by syllable, it was enough to bring the color to her cheeks. The swinging rhythm, the music itself, the pleasure of singing had obscured the syllables before. She even bit her lip now as she remembered that she had sung this song for a man—to a man—a stranger.

“It’s a—a song of happiness, I suppose I may call it,” she said at last.

“Happiness? Happiness? And in that lingo?” growled Buck. “They don’t have no such songs as

that in that language. You're keeping things back from me, and that makes me know that this is the beginning of the end. There ain't no doubt about that. It's the beginning of the end, because we'll never trust each other again."

"Dad!" she cried. "Oh, dad, why do you say that?"

"I got a thousand good reasons. I got reasons so good—they'd turn your blood cold!"

"What do you mean? Won't you tell me? Do you think I can't stand hearing them?"

"You couldn't stand it," he said. And, going back to her, he laid a hand upon her shoulder and another upon her hair. "There's things about you," he said, "that nobody living can guess, except me. When you sit alone and do your thinking and turn over your queer ideas in your head, you think that nobody knows. But I know, Joan. I know things about you that you'll never know, God willing."

"And you've tried to keep me here away from people so that I might never find out?"

"That's it."

"But now I'll go mad with eagerness to learn."

"You will learn, now that you've started on the out trail. But I'm going to fight to keep you back from it as long as I can."

"Why do you do it, dad? Why can't I live as other young girls live? Is there anything wrong with it?"

"Not for them. They can do their laughing and

their chattering. But you're meant for something else. And I've sworn that I'd keep you to a quiet life—”

“Who had the right to make you swear such a thing as that?”

“Your mother, Joan.”

“My mother!”

And she saw a picture of that gentle face, unsmiling, with the gold hair framing it and tarnishing slowly to gray. Could such a woman have locked up a secret?

“Oh, what is it?” she pleaded.

“You'll learn it all. Only I hope to God that the day when you learn it is far away ahead of you. If these were the old days when a man had power over his family, I'd close you into a room and keep you there for a year, until the last echo of this '*Que viva la rumba*' had worked out of your head!”

CHAPTER X

IT'S THE NICKNAME THAT COUNTS

"WHY the devil," said Sheriff Sim Hargess, "do you waste all that fine singing on the empty night? Might get paid for it in town!"

"I'm a gent open-handed by nature," declared Harry Gloster. "I like to give things away—including my songs."

"All I got to say," growled the sheriff, "is that you might save your singing for them that would appreciate it a pile more than I would."

"I ain't singing to you," declared the prisoner who was chained to the seat beside the sheriff. "I'm singing to the world in general. How d'you know what might be hearing me?"

"A coyote, maybe, taking lessons off yonder on a hill," suggested the sheriff.

"Maybe," said Gloster with the most perfect good nature. "I wouldn't grudge him none. Speaking of singing, the drinks are on me, and I'm setting up to entertain."

"Rats!" said the sheriff. "You talk plumb foolish."

"You got no heart in you," said Gloster. "What

functions for you is just a chunk of the law. If I was to shake you, I could hear the pages rustle. Otherwise, you'd see that I was overflowing with happiness."

"I never took none to singing," observed the sheriff dryly.

"Don't give up trying, though," urged Gloster. "Listen to this!"

And, tilting back his head, his voice rose and rang:

"Que viva la rumba;
Que viva, que viva placer;
Que vivan las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
Y guapas que saben querer!"

The sheriff groaned as the last note floated afar. And then, out of the thin distance, a coyote wailed an answer.

"You've waked 'em up," grinned the sheriff. "You got your audience, I see. Where'd you learn that fool thing?"

"Mexico."

"For Mexico it might do," said the sheriff pointedly.

"You're talking sort of straight," said Harry Gloster suddenly.

"That's me. I always make a habit of talking right out what I mean."

"Then swallow your tongue when you're talking to me," said Gloster, and turning in the seat as much

as his handcuffs and the chain permitted, he stared fixedly into the face of Sim Hargess. "I don't need your conversation to make me happy."

The sheriff met that cold eye for an instant and then turned his attention back to his span of mustangs. He felt, in fact, that he had gone too far. And like every man who felt that he was in the wrong, he was beginning to hate his companion. But, after a moment of silence, he found that his anger was dissipating. He was a man among men, was Sim Hargess, and presently he said:

"I guess you're right, partner. You got a right to sing if you want to. I'm kind of out of sorts to-night."

"I'm sorry for that," replied the other amiably. "What's wrong, may I ask?"

"Got a fine little sorrel filly. Went lame on me this morning."

"That's sure tough," agreed Gloster. "Lemme have a look at her when we have a chance. I know something about a hoss."

He turned and looked back to his own mount trotting contentedly behind the buckboard, swinging over to one side to get free from the dust.

"Yep, that's a good one you got for yourself."

"Not bad."

"We been so dog-gone busy that I forgot to ask your name."

"Sandy Williams," said Gloster. "That is my name."

"I mean your real name."

"That's it."

The sheriff laughed.

"You waited just a minute too long before you spoke," he said. "But we'll let it go at that, Sandy. By the way, where did you learn how to handle your fists? Been in the ring?"

"Nope."

"You ain't? But you sure can step! I started out to get you as soon as the fight begun. Didn't want the mob to smash you all up. But when I seen your style, I thought I'd wait and let you work."

"Thanks," said Gloster. "It was a fine little party while it lasted."

"While it lasted, it sure was."

They reached the town and presently the jail. It was a snug little building, recently built, and the sheriff was immoderately proud of his accommodations.

"Wall a foot and a half thick," he said, tapping on it. "All hard stone, too. And these here bars are all tool-proof stuff. There ain't no better steel made."

Harry Gloster paused on his way down the aisle and gripped a bar in his manacled hands. There was a convulsive twist of his shoulders and the great steel framework shuddered violently. In the distance a lock began to swing and jingle.

"You're big," muttered the sheriff, watching closely, "but you're stronger than you look—by a pile."

"I sure hope that I don't have to bust out and spoil all your decorations," said Harry Gloster politely. "Hate to leave a hole in that wall."

The sheriff grinned and led on to the door which the deputy who acted as jailer had opened before them. There were a dozen cells on the floor, each surrounded by open bars. It was possible to survey every cell in detail at a glance.

Into one of these Gloster was led and the irons removed. He was made comfortable. Fresh drinking water was brought to fill his pitcher, and then he was locked in for the night and left reclining on his bunk and smoking a cigarette with a meditative air of content.

"You had a look at him?" asked Sim Hargess of his deputy when they were seated in the office a moment later. "You had a good look at him, George?"

"Fair to middling."

"If you was to pick out a nickname to fit him what would you land on?"

George studied a moment. "Might call him—er—'Little Joe,' or 'Happy,' or something like that."

The sheriff nodded.

"Little Joe would be a fit," he declared. "But how would Sandy do?"

"Sandy? His hair's too yaller for any name like that, don't you figure? But how come you're aiming to pick out a name for him, Sim?"

"Said he was called 'Sandy' Williams."

He paused again.

"How did he look to you, George?"

"Sort of good-natured."

"Wouldn't mind getting into a fracas with him?"

George reached for his gun. Instinct and much training at the draw made the gesture lightning fast.

"Not if there was enough light for straight shooting," he said, with a rather twisted grin.

"That's the way I figured it," nodded the sheriff, and then frowned very seriously. "George, that fellow's got a record of some sort."

"He has? What is it?"

"I dunno. I'm going to find out. He wouldn't be traveling with a crooked name if there wasn't something wrong with him. We'll have a look around the country and listen in on what we can. Take a telegram down to the office, will you?"

And so, before many minutes, a message was ticking across the wires, north and south and east and west, inquiring from the sheriffs of many counties if a yellow-haired man over six feet tall and weighing about two hundred pounds, but looking thirty pounds bigger, were wanted for any crime.

But while this was going on, the yellow-haired man who weighed two hundred pounds and might look to be even thirty pounds heavier, lay on his bunk in the jail with his head pillowed on one thick arm, sound asleep and smiling in his dream.

CHAPTER XI

THE HAPPY PRISONER

It had been the intention of Lee Haines to leave the town the next morning. And he had been on his way across the veranda of the hotel after paying his bill when he received news which halted him. A tall, well-proportioned fellow with a very handsome face and black eyes under level black brows was passing. A black plaster covered one side of his chin and the face seemed swollen and discolored.

There was a chuckle from a chair near by after the young fellow passed.

"Young Gainor ain't going to be so darned free handed after this," rumbled a cow-puncher, cocking his sombrero on the back of his head.

"He ain't," agreed his nearest neighbor. "He sure got plenty. Pretty near got a busted jaw, they say. Took him fifteen minutes before he could sit up and ask where he was."

There was another laugh.

"He swears that somebody sneaked up behind him and hit him with a crowbar on the back of the head."

"Wasn't no such thing. I seen it all. He got soaked so hard that it lifted him off of his feet and landed him on the back of his neck."

Lee Haines looked thoughtfully after the retreating back of the man who had just passed. He was well above average size. He was solidly built. He might weigh, perhaps, a hundred and eighty pounds.

And then Haines found himself subconsciously struggling to create the picture of the man who had lifted this fellow off his feet with a blow and dropped him upon the back of his head. But his mind refused to function for such a purpose. He kept imagining a giant seven feet tall with a fist as big as a water bucket. The problem fascinated him so that he turned to the cow-punchers with a question.

"Did I hear that straight? Somebody lifted him off his feet and dumped him on the back of his neck?"

Two grave pairs of eyes encountered him and examined him. He was a stranger, and a stranger was not to be answered in haste. But one of them decided that he would do.

"Ain't you heard about the fracas?" he asked in turn.

"I slept late," said Lee.

"Gent named Sandy Williams cleaned up John Gainor and six more last night at the dance."

"Seven men!"

"All of seven. It was a mighty pretty thing to

watch. Drifted through 'em like quicksilver through sand. All good fighting men, too. Gainor, yonder, he's spent a lot of time on boxing lessons."

"What's Sandy? A giant?"

The two considered the question soberly.

"He looks bigger than he is," one said, and the second agreed.

Lee Haines recalled the stalwart who had walked into the hotel dining room the day before, but who, when he sat down, was hardly higher at the shoulders than Lee himself. He recalled, too, the blows that had dropped Joe Macarthur and left him senseless.

"Got a bush of curly yellow hair?" he asked.

"D'you know him?" they asked in chorus. "He's a stranger around these parts."

"I've seen him. Seems to be quite a man."

They declared fervently that he was two men rolled into one, and there followed a graphic description of the fight.

"Which he was laughing all the way through," one declared. "You'd of thought that he was dancing, or something like that. Took everything plumb easy. Floated around and jerked his fists into 'em, and every punch was like the tap of a sledge-hammer."

"I knew a man once—" began Lee Haines, and then his voice trailed away and his glance was lost in the sweep of a distant cloud. "What's become of Sandy?"

"Jail."

"Eh?"

"Five hundred dollars bail. For disturbing the peace, they say. But take it by and large, it was a mighty quiet disturbance. Judge Conley'll give him about five days in jail to let him think things over and then turn him loose. Conley is a good sort. He talks mighty loud, but the things he says ain't so bad."

Lee Haines forgot the journey which was before him. Instead, he went to the jail, and there he interviewed George, the deputy and jail keeper.

"How's the patient?" he asked.

"Wants more ham and eggs. It'd bust the county to feed two like him. He's all stomach."

"May I see him?"

"Everybody else has seen him. I guess you can," nodded George. "Might think he was a ghost and not a man the way folks come around to stare at him."

"Does he mind it?"

"Not him. He's got a word for 'em all. He'll have a word for you. You watch!"

He escorted Haines into the main room of the jail, and then sank onto a stool.

"Don't try to pass him nothing. I'm watching," he yawned. "Darned if I ain't tired out. There he is."

It was more than Haines had dared to hope for. He went hurriedly down the aisle between the rows

of bars, and presently he was before the cell in which was Harry Gloster, alias Sandy Williams.

And he found Harry on his knees, working with a deft and hasty pencil on the smooth stone flagging which had been whitened by much scrubbing. And growing upon the floor was the face of a girl, shadowy, coming out of a mist of many lines in the background. All that was real of her features and expression was the big eyes and their straight, far-off look, and the curving smile, faint upon her lips.

One might have said that it was a portrait of every pretty girl in the world; certainly it was a picture of no individual. There were too many places where the imagination was left to do as it pleased.

"Well? Who's that?" asked Haines.

The other whirled on him.

"Another?" he growled, and then, seeing who it was, he arose to his feet with a smile. "Hello, Haines," he said. "Things have been happening since I saw you last."

"Quite a lot," nodded Lee Haines. "You got into one mess on my account. Now you're in another on your own. What I've come to find out is this: How important is it for you to get across the border?"

The other considered with a perfect gravity.

"The difference is between living and dying, taking it by and large," he said, and he actually grinned at Haines.

"I thought it was something like that," nodded Haines, without showing the slightest surprise or shock. "What the devil made you hang around here all yesterday?"

"No reason. Just because I was a fool."

"Why did you fight last night?"

"Been a month since I've had a fight."

"That's not true. You mixed with Joe Macarthur yesterday afternoon."

"That wasn't a fight. He just did the receiving. I got the jump on him, you see."

Lee Haines sighed.

"You're a queer one," he declared. "Is that the girl you left behind you?"

He pointed toward the floor.

"That's the girl I haven't seen," he said.

"What's that? The one you've dreamed about, eh?"

"More than that. I heard her voice once."

"What sort of crazy talk—" began Haines, and then shook his head. "You're past me, partner. Where did you pick up the knack? That looks like professional work to me!"

"I've always handled a pencil and paints when I run onto 'em. My father showed me how when I was a kid."

"Your father?"

"Up in Colorado, you know. Consumption."

Haines nodded.

"Is it straight that your bail is five hundred?"

"Something like that."

"Son, I've got less than a hundred dollars with me."

"Why, Haines, I don't expect you to help me out of this boat. You didn't put me here. It's not your party."

"I believe you mean it," said Haines, gnawing his lip thoughtfully. "You saved me yesterday; you expect me to ride along and let you rot to-day. But there are things about me you don't know yet! Partner, I'm going to have you out of this."

"That's sure fine of you, Haines."

"The thing to do, of course, is to get that bail money before they find out what's against you and hold you without bail."

"That's the natural way of going about it, I should say."

"Tell me one thing: if they get you for whatever else you're accused of, are they sure to convict you?"

"On the testimony against me, they could hang ten men."

Haines looked at him sharply. He had spent more than half of a wild life among criminals of one kind or another; but he could not place the open face of Harry Gloster in that category—unless a sudden burst of passion. That, he decided, must be it. The outthrust of the jaw, the imperious nose, the restless eye were all typical of a highly excitable nature.

While he paused, a small thread of singing came

wavering into the jail through a barred window which was open.

“Que viva la rumba,
Que viva, que viva placer—”

“Oh, Lord!” cried Harry Gloster, and suddenly his shrill whistle caught up the air :

“Que vivan las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
Y guapas que saben querer!”

“Is that a signal?” asked Haines.

But Gloster, a man transformed with happy excitement, returned no answer. He did not even speak when Haines bade him farewell and left the jail.

CHAPTER XII

A VAIN SACRIFICE

THERE was a swirl of people before the veranda of the hotel when Haines stepped down from the door of the jail. The group was constantly recruited. It revolved around a shining bay horse of which Haines could see the tossed head and the shining coat only by glimpses through the crowd.

But what chiefly held his eye and the eye of all the others, was a girl standing on the verge of the veranda, with her hand raised, as if asking for attention. And she was getting it in a rush.

The hat which she had been waving to call attention was in her hand. Her head was exposed, covered with a softly waved mass of golden hair—the metal gold which turns to fire when the sun strikes on it.

And her flushed face, her eager eyes, drew men as honey draws flies. Lee Haines was past the days of romance, perhaps, but nevertheless, he hastened with the others toward the focal point.

“Say it over again,” someone was calling as he

arrived. "We're late. We didn't hear you the first time."

"I'm going to sell this horse to the highest bidder," the girl answered. "You can try out his paces, if you wish. But I'll give you my word that he's gentle—"

There was a deep hum of chuckling from the crowd. Not a man there who did not enjoy a little pitching when he swung into the saddle of a morning. It was the quickest way of warming up both man and beast for the day's work.

"Let's have a look at him," they began to urge.

"Get out of the way, Shorty. You've had a chance to size up the hoss! Lemme have a look, Sam!"

But those in the front rank, merely turning their heads with grins, announced that they had the first seats and that they intended to hold them, come what might. And so the little crowd became a heavily jammed mass. When a newcomer strove to press through he might send a wave of motion through the whole group, but he could not dislodge a single man.

But no one was looking at the horse. Instead, there was a profound concentration of attention upon the face of the girl. They gazed silently, with great wide eyes which banished the man in their faces and let the boy shine through.

They dwelt on her timidity, shrinking before so many eyes, and on her courage which spurred her

on and brought the high color into her cheeks. And they drank in the delicate contours of her face and her throat, forever changing as she turned her head.

It was as if a wild creature had dared to come in among the habitations of man in the middle of the day. An aroma of strangeness hung around her.

"Who is it?" whispered Haines, laying his hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him.

There was no answer.

"Who is it?" he repeated, increasing the strong pressure of his fingers.

His hand was struck away, but there was no other retort. In the meantime, the girl was apparently embarrassed and bewildered by the battery of eyes which searched her with never a pause. She reached down, and putting her hand under the chin of Peter, raised his head.

"Can you all see him?" she asked.

"Scatter out, you there in front," came a roar of voices from the rear. "We can't see nothing."

Of course, it was not Peter they alluded to and although they were close enough to see the girl, Lee Haines did not blame them for wanting to be closer. He wished to be closer himself. He felt a tingle of pleasure at the thought of standing near her, as though, indeed, she were surrounded by an electric atmosphere.

And he knew that a close eye would find no imperfections, that the careful examination would reveal no trace of wrinkles around the eyes, no

weariness about the mouth. It was as if the freshness of the dawn were to step into the middle of the noonday and refuse to fade with all its delicate colors.

"Peter, dear," he heard the voice of the girl saying, and his heart melted at the sound. "Come up here where they can see you. Good boy! Up!"

She clapped her hands together, leaning and smiling down to the horse. And up he leaped like a dog, and whirled hastily to keep his eyes on this unaccustomed crowd. There was a rumble of admiration and applause, for both the girl and the horse.

And indeed, Peter was as worthy of attention as the girl, in his own way. He stood not more than an inch or two over fifteen hands, and he was delicately made, but every scruple of his body was formed with a perfect hand. He could have stepped into a book as a type of what a horse should be. And yet he had strength as well.

One could see that he could run smoothly and as long as a clock could tick. There was a catlike nimbleness about him. And as he stood on the boards of the veranda, shifting his feet as he felt the old wood yield under him, he gave an impression of wonderful lightness, as though he would have bounded, the next instant, over the heads of the crowd and darted away for freedom.

Into the place which he had left vacant at the edge of the veranda the crowd had washed in-

stantly. A thick row of sombreros tilted up as their wearers stared at the girl.

"Here is Peter," she said, and as she extended a hand toward him he pricked his ears and thrust out his nose to sniff at it. "And, oh, if I should tell you what a good horse he is, you'd hardly be able to believe!"

"We'll believe," rumbled someone, and there was an eloquent grunt from the others. They would have believed anything from her lips, felt Lee Haines. He was ready for the same thing himself.

"You won't have to chase him across fields the way I've seen some people chasing horses. When you go to the fence and call he'll come to you. And if you haven't any sugar, he's just as happy!"

There was a faint chuckle from the crowd. The thought of carrying sugar for a horse was a stretch outside of their imaginations.

"You won't need a whip or spurs for Peter. He'll run till his heart breaks for you!"

Her eyes grew bright with tears, so great was her earnestness. In quite forgetting all her timidity in her enthusiasm for Peter, she stood straighter and her voice rose a little, while she passed an affectionate arm under Peter's head—and he stood as still as a rock.

"And he's always the same. He's never tired. You can ride him every day. He'll never be lame. He's true gold all the way through! On my honor!"

She paused and drew another breath.

"I have to sell him," she said sadly, "to some man who'll be kind to him, I know. For who could help being kind to Peter?"

She paused again with a hand extended frankly, as though to invite them into her perfect confidence in all mankind, and there was a little sway and stir in the crowd as every man vainly strove to get closer.

"And so, if any one will offer a price—"

"I'll say three hundred," said one.

"Three fifty!"

"Four!"

"Five hundred dollars!"

"Five fifty!"

It was much money for cattlemen to pay for a horse, but Lee Haines knew that they were bidding for a smile from the girl, not for the horse itself. And though yonder in the jail was a man to whom he owed his life and for whom he would have laid down his own safety, yet he knew that if he had the money in his pocket he would have joined the most enthusiastic bidders. The mere cow-punchers had drawn away a little, hopeless when they saw such money offered. It was only the ranchers who were calling now.

But the voice of Joan halted them, saying: "Five hundred is what I need. Who offered that?"

"I!" came the shout, and there were six voices in it.

She shook her head, bewildered.

"Who offered it?" she asked.

"I offered it," said Jud Carter, pushing his gaunt form through the crowd.

"Then Peter is yours!"

There was a shout of protest from the others.

"He was up for the highest bidder, lady! You got to sell him that way."

"But five hundred," she argued, "is all that I need—poor Peter! Good boy!"

A wave of grief called her attention from the men to the horse beside her, and the demands of the higher bidders were suddenly forgotten.

"And here," said Jud Carter, climbing to her side, "is the coin. Lucky I had it handy with me!"

He removed his hat with a flourish, very conscious that he was making a picture which would be long remembered, and not at all aware that it would be remembered mostly because it was ridiculous in the contrast of the slender girl, graceful as music, with his bony, work-twisted body, as he leaned above her.

She took the money, rewarded poor Jud with a trembling smile, and then threw her arms around Peter. A gaping crowd saw the tears tumble out of her eyes, saw her lift his head and press her cheek against his muzzle, and then she was gone, while Peter turned and trotted after her, raising a cloud of dust from the veranda flooring.

Jud Carter, by a burst of sprinting, captured the horse and led him down to the ground, and there he was surrounded by a clamorous crowd, laughing, roaring out a hundred comments.

But Joan had hurried straight down the street with a step as free and athletic as the stride of a boy. And so she came to the courthouse and the city hall, combined in one wide, low-fronted building. From the old pensioner at the door she asked the way to Judge Conley's office, and the ancient unkinked his back and strode grinning beside her until he had brought her to the sanctum of the judge himself.

"They are all kind," thought Joan as she entered the office of the judge. "All these men are so gentle, I wonder why my mother wanted to keep me away from them? Why could it be?"

So she stood in front of Judge Conley who, as he turned in his swivel chair, was encountered by the eloquent wink of the old man who was just closing the door. Therefore, the judge, to cover a responsive grin, had to frown and clear his throat, a proceeding which made Joan back a step away.

He seated her in another moment, however. And when all the wrinkles were out of his forehead, it seemed to Joan that he was like all the rest of his kind—overflowing with good-nature and eagerness to help her. And as he drew the chair out of the shaft of sunshine and waved her into it, he remained leaning over it with one hand rested on the arm.

It brought him so close to Joan that she had to lean farther back in the chair to smile up at him. But smile she did, although there was a wild riot of

fear and hope and grief—for Peter—in her heart. For she was beginning to find that smiles worked wonderfully well with men. A smile struck a light into their eyes, made them alert, supplanted the very joints of their limbs.

So it was with the judge now. He beamed down upon her, a veritable rain of good-will.

"And what's the trouble now?" he asked. "What's the trouble, since nothing but trouble brings people to me? Let's start right in with your name and then we'll go through with the rest of the story."

"Joan Daniels," she answered.

The judge recoiled, struck the back of his knees against the edge of his swivel chair and sat down heavily within it. The force jogged the spectacles low on his chin, and the knowledge that he had appeared ungraceful made him scowl to recover his lost ground.

"Ah," said he, "then you're the one that I've heard of—that lives all by herself with a silent man for a father? Well, well! I've heard a good deal about you!"

She shook her head, saying that she did not know who could have talked about her, because she knew no one, but she had heard that he was the man to whom one came when one wished to pay a bail.

"A bail!" exclaimed the judge, starting in his chair, and then rocking far back in it until his short legs swung clear of the floor. "Bail? Who the devil—I mean, what bail do you want to pay?"

His violence drove some of the color out of Joan's cheeks, and as she stared at him, he sat forward again and managed to reach out and pat her hand.

"There, there," he said. "I didn't mean to frighten you. Whose bail do you want to pay?"

She swallowed.

"There is a man who was arrested last night. I think he's called Sandy Williams—"

She saw the face of the judge darken.

"My dear—Miss Daniels," said the judge, "what interested you in him?"

"I can't tell you that," she admitted. "But here I have the money to pay—the whole five hundred, you see!"

And she leaned forward, her eyes bright with delight. The judge, however, paid not the slightest heed to the money. Instead, he picked up a yellow telegraph slip from the desk beside him and extended it toward her.

"I don't know what you know about the man who calls himself Sandy Williams. But no matter whatever else you know about him, I imagine that you don't know this—and you ought to!"

She looked down to the slip of paper and saw typewritten across it in capitals:

HOLD SANDY WILLIAMS UNTIL MY
ARRIVAL. HIS REAL NAME, HARRY
GLOSTER, WANTED HERE FOR MURDER

OF HAL SPRINGER AND RUDY NICHOLS
LAST WEEK. TWO THOUSAND DOL-
LARS REWARD WILL BE PAID TO—

The brief remainder danced into a smudge of
black.

CHAPTER XIII

THROWING DICE WITH DEATH

Now that the girl was gone, the center of attention was the horse. And with the horse was unlucky Jud Carter as the cynosure of all eyes.

"And what," said someone, "d'you aim to do with that hoss, Jud?"

"Why," announced Jud, still somewhat crestfallen over the sudden disappearance of the girl, but his eye brightened as he looked over the racy lines of Peter, "I reckon that I can use him well enough. Couldn't you?"

"Maybe I could," said the other, "but I dunno that I would."

"What might you be meaning by that?"

"Why d'you think that most of the gents were bidding in on that hoss?"

"Why—I dunno—"

"Ain't it true that there ain't a man here that would want to pay five hundred for one hoss when he could get five hosses that'd be good to work cattle with?"

"Maybe that's true."

"Then why did they all bid up?"

"Why—matter of fact—"

"Matter of fact, they were just trying to help that girl out of the trouble that made her need five hundred dollars."

Jud came from a thrifty family. He looked about him in amazement.

"You mean to say that they wanted to *give* away five hundred?"

"No," was the response; "because they figured that it was worth that much to get an introduction to the girl."

Jud Carter passed a work hardened hand across his forehead. But before his wits had cleared after this argument, and while he was still surrounded by men who were striving to show him an impossible point of view, he was removed from his difficulties by a new intervention.

For Joan herself came slowly down the street and through the crowd and went straight to Jud. She carried in her hand, still, the same money which he had given her. And coming to him, she looked up in his face with great, fear stricken, wistful eyes.

"Do you think," she asked, "that I could buy Peter back from you for just as much as you paid? Here is the same money, you see!"

It was the smile from heaven for Jud. He had been swept off his feet a little before—with all of the others around him—but the thought of losing five hundred dollars or the respect of the community had sobered his close figuring brain completely. His

throat closed so tight that he could only reach for the money with one hand and gesture to Peter with the other.

All in an instant Joan had given a faint cry of joy and was back in the saddle. A twitch of the reins and Peter was through the midst of them. A word and he was kicking the dust behind him as he galloped down the street.

As for those who had done the bidding for Peter a little while before, they glanced after her with the wistful eyes of youth, seeing that one has only to turn the corner with any man in order to find him in his boyhood again. But while they were still gaping and had not said a word, news came hobbling out to them in the form of the old man who was the office boy, janitor, and all around messenger of the courthouse, with more knowledge about each office in the old building than had the very tenants themselves.

It was he who now spread the word. How he knew no one could guess, for Judge Conley had certainly not told him. But perhaps the walls in that building were overly thin, or else keyholes were overly large. At any rate, he bore tidings of everything—of how the girl had come with five hundred dollars' bail to get Sandy Williams free; and of how the judge had placed before her a telegram announcing that Williams was no other than a certain Harry Gloster, who had killed two men a week before, and therefore he was not open to bail of any amount.

This was the news which sent a buzz of wonder through the town. It was a salve for the battered jaws and the sore ribs of the men who had stood up to Harry Gloster the night before and found themselves going down like ninepins. For, after all, a man who was capable of a double murder was capable of almost anything.

But the only one who felt no thrill of excitement was Lee Haines. For when he heard the news it seemed as though a weight had fallen upon his shoulders, bowing him, and that a shadow had dropped across his eyes.

At any rate, he went slowly, slowly back to the hotel, rented his room for another day, and when in the room he first of all carefully removed the bandage from his right hand. That hand was stiff, and the ragged wound in the palm was still unhealed.

But, making a grimace from the pain it caused him, he began to open and shut the fingers. A few drops of blood oozed out as he continued, but he kept working until the hand was supple.

After that, to rest the aching nerves of the hand, he lay on his back on the bed and ran his eyes over the cracks on the ceiling, and for every branching and turning of the long cracks above him he found branchings and turnings in his own life. He could read them as if they were notes to freshen his memory and bring up to his mind all that ever he had done or seen.

And he had done too much ; he had seen too much.

So that from time to time he would close his eyes and relax, outworn by the effort, and at such times, his face relaxing, the flesh about his mouth and under his eyes sank in a little so that his face was like a death mask—or like death itself.

The day sloped into the quiet and the shadow of the evening. When he was aware of the incessant beat and metal hammering in the blacksmith shop by its cessation; when the subdued voices which had gone on all the day were hushed away, and there were single calls from children in the street or bursts of laughter from a group of merrymakers, then he sat up on the bed, slowly, and leaned his head in his hand.

There he sat until the darkness was complete. And when he began to move again it was with such a faltering slowness that indeed he seemed a feeble old fellow who has lived out the appointed three-score and ten, instead of a burly and vigorous man in the latter prime of life.

However, what he was doing had a significance which was young enough. He was looking to his revolver. And he was looking to it in the utter blackness of the dark!

His fingers seemed to have eyes for that work. They worked swiftly, and yet were unhurried. The big weapon was first unloaded, and then it was taken apart all in the dark, and all in the dark it was re-assembled, the shells inserted again, and the cylinder was spun. And the action was as smooth as silk.

If any one could have watched, they would have wondered not so much at the thing that was done, but that any man would have spent all the countless hours that must have been required in practice before he could have become so familiar with all the parts of a revolver that he would know each by the touch. But such, however, was the skill of Lee Haines, and the fact that he had such a skill threw a sharp light down his past.

When his gun was ready and loaded once more he was still not ready. He lighted a lamp, drew his shade, and spent an hour in a strange practice, which consisted of jerking the gun from the holster on his thigh with lightning speed and leveling it at some object in the room, which might be the knob of the door or the high light which lay along the rim of the bowl on the washstand. Then he began to walk softly to and fro in the room, and when the impulse moved him he jerked out his weapon and whirled, aiming it again.

They were adroit movements, but always they appeared to disappoint Haines. And finally he went to the stained and cracked mirror, and, holding the lamp above his head, he examined his face with a care which plainly showed that he considered himself an old man.

After he set down the lamp he clapped a hat on his head, however, and went straight down the stairs to the rear of the hotel, and thence to the stable which was behind it. There he entered a stall in

which was a great black stallion, a giant of his kind, yet built for speed as well as strength. In the days of old he could have galloped at high speed with all the crushing impost of a knight in full armor upon his back.

Even the solid bulk of so big a man as Lee Haines would be nothing to his strength. He could trot along all day, just as a range mustang could trot under the burden of an ordinary man. He saddled the great black horse, arranged the pack behind the saddle, all with the consummate care of one who knows that little details count most in big affairs, and then led the spirited animal out and mounted.

His journey led straight down the street of the village where the greatest number of eyes would fall upon him, but the moment he was clear of the outskirts of the town he turned to the left and made a swift semicircle which brought him back to the vicinity of the jail. Here he dismounted.

There was a thicket behind the building. It had been cleared away for ten paces, but after this the brush was thick and high enough to hide a mounted man. Here he threw the reins of the black horse and dismounted; and as he did so he heard a girl's voice singing not far away a Mexican waltz song:

"Que viva la rumba;
Que viva, que viva placer."

He listened to the singing for a moment. There was something so joyous and careless in it that it

made his mood of the moment darker than ever. She might be still singing, this happy passer-by, when guns were sounding in the jail.

After that he went forward again, circled the building, and came to the front entrance. It was surrounded by a group of men talking idly of idle things, but there was no doubt that they had been drawn there by the knowledge that a murderer was inside.

The door to the office was open, and in it were Sim Hargess and his deputy, with a half dozen others. Lee Haines picked Hargess from the rest and drew him to one side.

"Sheriff," he said, "I have something of importance to tell you. It has to do with your man, Harry Gloster, inside."

"Let's have it, then."

"Rather have you alone when I tell it."

The sheriff regarded him for a moment of doubt, then he sent the others from the room and shut the door behind them.

"I guess you got no objections to George staying?" he said.

"I'd rather have you alone, sheriff."

Again the sheriff hesitated. But eventually, with a shrug, he bade George follow the others.

"Mind if I lock the door behind him?" asked Haines, doing the thing before he received an answer.

"What the devil!" growled Hargess. "You afraid

that they'll break in to hear what you have to say?"

"They'd spoil everything for me," answered Haines seriously, "if they should hear. Sit down, sheriff. It won't take me long once I'm started to—"

He stepped to a chair as he spoke, and the sheriff leaned to be seated, but as he did so his eyes caught on a glint of metal. He cursed softly and straightened again, staring into the muzzle of Haines's revolver.

"Very neat, damn you!" he said bitterly.

"Sorry, sheriff. But put them up quick. I'm pressed for time even with the door locked."

The sheriff raised his hands obediently.

"The keys?" demanded Haines.

"On the desk there."

"Thanks. What horse is that tied behind the jail?"

"Mine."

"Going to have to borrow that roan, sheriff. Return him to you when I get a chance."

"You'll sweat for this one of these days."

"Most likely I shall. Step inside, will you?"

He waved to the jail entrance, and Sim Hargess obediently led the way. Obedience was in his manner, but not in his mind, however, for as he stepped through the door into the cell room he leaped to the side of the door with a shout and drew his revolver as he whirled.

It took Lee Haines by surprise. Otherwise there would have been no time for even the shout. But

as it was, he tapped the sheriff over the head with the long barreled weapon which he carried. The sheriff dropped on his face, as loosely sprawling as if a ten ton wagon had rolled over him.

Outside the building there was an answering yell of inquiry from Deputy George. At the door it was taken up by the clamor of a dozen voices.

CHAPTER XIV

FREEDOM HAS ITS SHACKLES

THAT calling transformed the leisurely movements of Haines into wild haste. He leaned to scoop up the gun which was still clasped by the unnerved fingers of the sheriff; then he raced down the aisle to the cell of Harry Gloster.

"Harry!" he called as he ran. "We're leaving together. Take this!" He tossed the revolver to him. "Now if I can find the key that fits this damned door—"

He began to work feverishly, groaning as every key failed to fit the lock. Gloster had merely scooped up his hat and placed it on his head, completing his readiness to leave. Now he took the revolver, spun it in his hand, and then tossed it onto his bunk.

"I'll leave this where it'll do no harm," he said. "A gun like that is apt to do a lot of killing if a man doesn't look out."

Haines favored him and the discarded weapon with a glance of rapt wonder.

"That's a fool's idea!" he declared. "But—" Here the lock turned and the door was cast open by Gloster's shoulder.

"Now for the rear door!" cried Haines. "Right outside the sheriff's horse is tied. Jump into the saddle. I'll cut the reins loose. Fast, Gloster, for God's sake!"

Down the sides of the building ran voices, and at the front door there was a furious battering. And far away, up and down the village street, they could hear the shouts and the beating of hoofs as men, attracted by the clamor at the jail, threw themselves into the saddle and scurried for the scene of action.

The two inside reached the rear door, twisted at the knob, and found it locked. It meant another search among the keys, and such a search meant a delay which would render all escape hopeless.

Haines, with a groan, started to fit the keys, however—since even hopeless work is better than inaction—but Gloster warned him away, and as he stepped aside a human battering ram went past him and hurled itself against the door.

It was a stout door. The safety of the cells depended on the tool-proof steel of the bars, alone, but nevertheless, all the approaches to the building were strongly blocked. And now the door flung back the heavy body of Gloster as if he were a rubber ball. He staggered away, found footing once more, and returned to the charge, shooting straight ahead, then swerving at the last instant and giving the

wood the rubbery mass of muscle on his shoulders as a pad for his weight.

The shock cracked the lock as if it were cast-iron. The door flew open and spilled Gloster into the outer night where he was welcomed by a yell from half a dozen throats.

Lee Haines jumped out to join the fracas, his deadly long revolver poised. But Gloster arose from the shadow at his feet, where he had fallen, and struck the weapon out of his hand.

"No shooting for me!" he commanded, and lunged at the sheriff's roan horse.

As for Haines, with an oath of helpless anger, he stooped, caught up his fallen gun, and arose to find some one running straight on him, firing at every step. No doubt it was the jar of his own running that ruined the aim of the on-comer.

But Haines had no time to find the trigger of his own weapon. He had seized it by the barrel, and now he dashed the heavy butt into the face of his assailant. The man went down with a gasp, and Haines turned toward Gloster long enough to see that the other was hopelessly lost.

Three men had thrown themselves upon him as he was wrenching apart the reins that tethered the roan. And Haines gave up a lost cause and raced for the shelter of the bush.

He was neglected for the instant, as all the rest were focusing on Gloster, and Lee ventured a glance back from the shrubbery.

What he saw was Gloster rising out of a cluster of men as a dog shakes himself free from a scrambling, weak-toothed litter of puppies. One of the three was prostrate, a second went down at that instant as if struck with a club; the third staggered away, and then, encouraged by the yells of a solid group which was charging to his assistance, dived in again to the attack.

Haines saw him picked up, heaved into the air as if he were no more than the fragile body of a child, and then flung into the faces of the onrushing men. The leaders went down under the blow. Those behind them were entangled, and before the tangle cleared, Gloster was on the back of the roan and dashing for the crowded shadows of the shrubbery.

He plunged past Haines, three steps away, and was gone with a crash among the young trees. On the scene of the battle, men were picking themselves up, cursing brokenly. A roar of guns followed, the bullets rattling through the brush, and Gloster called hastily: "Haines! Haines! For God's sake, where are you?"

He reined in his horse, heedless of the bullets which were whistling near him. But there was no answer from Haines.

Instead, a slenderer and smaller figure now rushed a horse out of the darkness where he had expected to see the other man come to join. He jerked his horse around and charged the newcomer to strike him to the ground.

But the latter dodged, with a horse as slippery as an eel. And, the next instant, a girl's voice was crying to him: "Follow me! This way! Ride hard!"

Amazement engulfed him, and then he rode as fast as the sheriff's horse would take him, in pursuit of the girl. She led him straight at a thick, low copse. But when he half expected to see her and her horse come to ruin in the wall of brush, they suddenly ducked out of sight in it.

And, at the very verge of the thicket, he saw a narrow opening which twisted to the left, made by grazing cattle, perhaps, breaking a path through to come at nearby water. He reined back the roan and wound through the brush at a more moderate pace, coming out on the farther side into a little hollow which pointed down a shallow arroyo. And in the hollow was the girl, waiting for him.

"You've gained on them!" she cried, clapping her hands together in her delight. "They'll have to ride around the thicket to come on your trail again. Ride fast—ride hard! Or if you stay at all, only stay to take my horse. There's nothing in the country that can come up with him for running—"

He could not believe his ears. Beyond the thicket, men were shouting, men were riding here and there, baffled by his disappearance. These were precious moments to put a distance between himself and them. But instead of taking her advice, he pressed closer to her and peered down into her face. The starlight was bright—bright enough to give him a

thousand hints of her beauty, and yet so dim that a shadow still lay across her features.

"You're the girl," he said. "I knew that voice as well as though I'd heard you singing the song—"

"Don't stop to talk!" she cried. "Be gone at once. Don't you hear them? Don't you hear them?"

In fact, the noise of horses and of shouting was spreading, behind them, to either edge of the thicket, and before long the riders would swarm out into the arroyo.

"I can't leave till I know your name."

"Joan. Joan Daniels. Now—quickly—"

"I'm not going yet. What brought you here?"

"I don't know, except that something was telling me that perhaps"—she broke off to say, pressing closer to him and putting a hand on his arm—"the two men they say you killed—"

"I never laid a hand on them. They were my partners, Joan. I came back from hunting. I found them dead, and I ran for it, because I knew that I didn't have any defense—"

"I knew you couldn't have done it. I knew that, but I wanted to hear what—"

"I've been trying to draw your face, Joan, but everything that I've imagined has been wrong. You're a thousand times more beautiful. I'd give a year of life to see you only once in the sunlight—"

"You mustn't talk of that! Don't you hear them

coming? Don't you hear them riding around the thicket?"

The hand on his arm trembled. He took it in both his own, and as he drew her a little nearer, she raised her head and looked steadily up into his face. The noise of the riders faded from his mind.

"What is your hair, Joan? In the starlight it looks only like a pale glow of light. Is it gold?"

"It's yellow hair," she said.

"It's metal gold," he answered. "And what color are your eyes, Joan?"

"Blue. Now go, Harry, for God's sake, go!"

"You're not happy with me here?"

"So happy it's like sadness. Oh, being near you is a wild happiness! And when I touch you, it's as though I took all of your strength into my hand."

"And when I touch you, Joan, I feel as if I'd taken the blue out of the sky and all the gold out of the mountains, and all the laughing and the singing out of the world."

"Hush!" she pleaded. "If you say such things, I'll be begging you to stay. And now they come—oh, don't you see?"

"What do I care? I'm living a year every second. I've spent a whole life of happiness right here trying to tell you how much I love you, Joan. But the words don't tell you what I mean."

"Then for my sake go!"

"Ask me again, Joan."

"For my sake."

"And you care for me—just a little to begin with?"

"Yes!"

"Then—" He took her in his arms, but with her face raised to his, something weakened and snapped in him. And in her face and her eyes he found a solemn power which kept him from touching her with his lips.

Another moment and he was spurring away for freedom.

CHAPTER XV

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW

It was just as Gloster plunged into the wood near the jail that a bullet struck Haines. And there was a sting of irony that went almost as deep as the plunging bullet in the knowledge that he was struck by a random shot. After the thousand dangers he had faced, to be killed by accident—

He thought of all that as he sagged against a tree trunk, watching with dim eyes the shadowy horsemen who were racing through the wood in the pursuit of the escaped man. Then, as he strove to get to the black stallion, his foot caught. He fell heavily and struck the side of his head against a stump.

He lay only a few moments on the ground, but it seemed to him an eternity. He was faint and weak when his eyes opened again, and the roar of voices in the town and about the jail had grown into a heavy chorus.

He felt of the blood which trickled from his wounds where the bullet had entered and left his body, and he knew that he was indeed no better than a dead man. What he wanted most of all was

to get into the open, lie flat on his back and, watching the cold stars grow dim, so die. If only he could find water in the sands, for a fire of thirst was burning in him, closing his dry throat.

Stumbling on in this fashion through the wood, with shadows already swinging before his eyes, he ran against a projecting branch, a stiff and strong-tipped bough which cut against the wound. He clapped his hand over the place, felt the blood gush, and staggered weakly on toward the black horse.

The stallion remained honestly where he had been placed, but his low neigh of greeting came faint and far to Lee. He reached for the pommel and then found that he would never have the strength to pull himself into the saddle.

"Lee Haines!" someone was calling.

"Not he!" answered Haines, staggering as he turned. "Not Haines, Gloster. Come get me, and be damned to you—"

And then his misting eyes saw that it was only a girl who stood before him, and he knew it was a girl's voice that had spoken.

"It is Haines!" she was crying eagerly.

"Where's Gloster?"

"He's gone as fast as a fast horse can take him away."

"Thank God!"

They were interrupted by a rushing of men and horses through the brush, and the clamor of a score of voices calling. Already the light cavalry of the

town had swept into the pursuit; others were following. A cluster plunged past the girl and Haines not a dozen feet away. But they were looking for moving figures, and these stationary shadows remained unseen.

"Why aren't you riding?" she asked.

"Riding?" Haines echoed. "I'll go as far as water and stay there. Is there water near here—"

He coughed, and the excruciating pain stopped his voice. She stepped close to him, and as the agony abated a little, he could see that it was the girl who had sold Peter that day and bought him back again.

"You're wounded—badly," she was saying.

"I'm nicked—nothing bad. If you can tell me where there's water and—"

He stumbled and would have fallen, but her shoulder caught under his, and held him strongly up. She drew one of his dangling arms around her neck. Her right arm she passed around him, and now half his weight slumped lifelessly upon her.

"Try to walk—slowly!" she gasped, and they staggered on through the darkness.

"Doesn't amount to anything," she heard him say. "I'll just tie up the place they nicked me—be all right in a minute and—you go along about your business—nobody must find you with me—"

But no matter how bravely he talked, she saw that his head had fallen far forward so that he was blinded to the way they went, and every moment the weight she was carrying increased. There was a

wild fear in her. She felt that at any moment it might overtake her and paralyze her. And so she fought it back savagely and centered all her mind on the need of the big man whose weight was lurching to and fro against her.

She had seen an old cabin, more than half ruined, which stood among the trees, and to this she now led Lee Haines. He was barely past the door when he slumped down, his weight tearing away from her gripping hands, while he murmured: "I'll just sit down here to rest a minute. Be all right—you run along now—"

His weakening voice and his fall told her a thousand things more than his words.

"Have you a match?" she cried. "Oh, quickly!"

"Here's one. Did I hear water running some place here?"

She took the box of matches from his hand. It was always that way, she understood, with men who had been badly wounded. A torturing thirst burned in them.

She struck a light and looked anxiously around her. The cabin was a wreck indeed. There was no flooring. Half of the roof had caved in under the weight of a falling branch which thrust a great cluster of dead boughs and twigs into the building. Red rust was eating the remnants of an iron stove to dust in a corner.

In another space there was a bunk built against the wall: it must have been two or more years

since the place was inhabited, yet by the bunk stood a singularly vivid memento of the man who had once dwelt here. It was a candlestick with a short section of time-yellowed candle still in it.

Here her match burned out. With a second one she lighted the candle.

"Not too much light!" Haines gasped. "I want to die away from 'em. I don't want them around me yapping and asking questions. Put something around it. And a little water—"

His voice was cut away by another cough and she saw his big limbs contracted by a spasm of agony. No doubt that wound was grimly serious, but water seemed to her the most crying need.

Not ten steps from the door she found the pump, still used by random passers-by, it appeared, for it was primed. She filled Haines's canteen with clear, cool water and brought it back to him.

He caught it with a great shaking hand that spilled half the contents down his breast. She had to hold it for him and his eyes made her shudder. They were like the tortured eyes of a dumb beast dying in agony. But this creature who lay mute was a man!

After that she looked to his wound. His whole right side was adrip with blood, and when she cut away the shirt with his own knife, she saw a purple rimmed hole—

Blackness swam across her eyes. Then she got swaying to her feet.

"I'll have a doctor here in one minute—"

He shook his head with such an expression of earnest entreaty in his face that she paused.

"All this needs is to be plugged—to stop bleeding. After that, I'll be all right—"

"You can't be sure! And when I see it—"

"I know. You've never seen a fellow clipped with a slug before. But this is nothing. Leaves you weak for a little while. After that, when the blood stops running—a man is all right. I'll be walking around in an hour!"

She studied his face anxiously, but he smiled back at her, and she dropped to her knees beside him.

"Then tell me what to do. Tell me how to help you!"

"If I had a pad of cloth—"

She turned from him, ripped away her underskirt, and tore it into strips. He followed her movements, nodding with a sort of weak admiration.

"Very strong for a girl," he said. "*Very* strong! Never would dream it from the size of your wrist."

She wondered that he could say such things; but after all she decided that he must be very familiar with wounds and must know that this one was not deadly. She made pads of the cloth.

With his own hands he placed those pads over the wound behind and the wound in front. Then she tied the bandage around him, drawing it to such a point of tightness as he demanded.

After that, he wanted water again. She brought it, and again held the canteen to his lips.

Some of the pain had gone from his eyes now. And in its place there was a shadow like sleepiness, very like it!

She was rejoiced when he smiled faintly at her, and in her happiness, smiling back to him, she took one of his hands and cherished it between both her own.

CHAPTER XVI

EYES THAT SAW NOT

It appeared to her that he was growing momentarily older and older, that his cheeks were thinner and that his eyes were sinking into a shadow, while a pale circle came around his mouth. His lips seemed tinted with blue.

"You're sure that this is the right thing to do—that there's no danger?" she asked.

"Not a bit."

"What can I do now?"

"Go home and go to bed and forget that you saw me."

"Do you really want me to do that?"

"Of course. You mustn't be found with me."

"But who'll take care of you?"

"I'll be away in half an hour."

"Away?"

"On my horse, I mean."

"You couldn't possibly ride, after being so hurt."

"You don't know. I've been sliced up worse than this before. This is an old, old story!"

She hesitated, but at last she shook her head with conviction.

"I won't say a word if you don't want to be bothered," she assured him, "but I want to stay here to try to make you comfortable. For instance, don't you want something under your head?"

And taking off her jacket, she rolled it and placed it under his head. Whatever his words had been, he accepted her ministrations. And looking down into his eyes as she leaned above him, it seemed to her that they were bottomless wells of gratitude.

"That's good," he whispered to her. "But why are you doing these things for me?"

"You risked yourself to save another man," she explained. "Isn't it right that I should help you?"

"Is Gloster your brother?"

"Oh, no."

"Ah," nodded Haines. "I see how it is! Poor girl, you're engaged to Harry."

"But I'm not, you know."

"What!"

"He's never even seen me."

He stared blankly at her.

"Well," he said, "I'll ask no questions. And no matter what's against Gloster, he's a man. As for what I've done for him, it's nothing. He's already done as much for me. Hand and hand about, you know, that's the only way people can get on."

"He's helped you? Tell me about that!"

He smiled at her eagerness, with that sleepy

shadow, as she thought it, gradually deepening in his eyes.

"An enemy of mine found me when I had this hand bandaged the other day."

He exposed that hand, with blood crusted on the palm from the use of his revolver. The friction of the butt must have caused him exquisite pain, and the girl shuddered at the raw-edged wound.

"It was about to be my finish," went on Lee Haines, "but Harry Gloster stepped in between me and the other fellow's gun."

He paused and then added softly: "Never had met me before—never heard of me—hadn't talked with me five minutes—but he jumped right in between me and a fellow who can make a revolver talk seven languages. Gloster hit twice, and that ended the fight. Bare handed work against a revolver. It was a pretty fine thing!"

"But just like him!" cried the girl.

"I thought you didn't know him?"

"I've seen him."

"And having seen him, you know all about him?"

Suddenly he reached for her hand, found it, and drew it close to his breast. And the fingers which touched hers she thought colder than running water.

"My dear," said Haines, "I once knew a girl that was in love with a fellow like Gloster. No, he was really like nobody in the world. But like Gloster, the law made no difference to him. Will you let me tell you what happened to her?"

She nodded.

"She looked like you. That's what put it into my head. She had the same sort of metal gold hair and the same kind of blue eyes. Mind you, she was still as different from you as Gloster is from the man she loved.

"She was very quiet; very gentle; and to see her, you'd wonder how any man—or woman either, for that matter—could bear to make her suffer. But the man she loved—well, to tell you the short of it, he tortured her!"

"Oh," murmured Joan. "How terrible! If a man were so cruel to me—no matter how I loved him—"

"What would you do?"

"I'd leave him, even if my heart were to break."

"Ah, but you see, as I said before, you're quite different from Kate Cumberland."

"Was that her name?"

"Yes."

"Kate was my mother's name," mused the girl. "But won't you tell me what happened?"

"Yes. Dan Barry was the man she loved—but I suppose you've never heard of him?"

"Never."

"There was a time when I thought everyone in the world would know about him sooner or later. Just what he was, I don't know. Nobody knows. He was simply different.

Old Joe Cumberland, the squarest old rancher

that ever lived, was riding about sunset time, one day, and he heard a queer whistling on the brow of a hill. He rode up there and he saw a boy—just a youngster—bare legged and dressed in rags—walking along with his head back, watching the wild geese flying north and whistling up at them.”

“Ah?” murmured the girl, and she leaned forward, pushing the candle closer, as though its light on the face of the man might help her to understand the story.

“Joe took the youngster home and raised him. Had a hard time. Dan Barry—he gave that for his name—didn’t seem to know where his mother or his father was. And when he was asked where he came from, he simply waved a hand at the southern horizon. And when he was asked where he was going and why, he didn’t know. He tried to run away at first, but when he was always caught, he gave it up. Finally he seemed to be quite happy.

“But he was different from other people. He was as quiet as a girl, most of the time. But when he was stirred up, he turned into a fighting devil. A fighting devil,” repeated Haines with a sort of religious awe. “And when he fought, though he wasn’t a big man, he had the strength of half a dozen men. Imagine a hundred and fifty pound wildcat, you see?

“Cumberland had seen him in a couple of passions when he was a youngster, and he made up his mind that the only way to keep Dan from getting into

trouble was to keep guns out of his hands when he was around other men. He'd let him hunt as much as he pleased, but he never let him wear a gun when he was going to town.

"And Barry lived mostly in the mountains—mighty little at home. He came back with a wounded wolf one day. Barry called it a dog. But he was the ringer of a black-coated wolf, and a mighty big one.

"That was the 'dog' that Dan called Black Bart. It was danger on four paws, that wolf. Ready to tear the heart out of any other man and ready to die for Dan.

"Another time he came back with a black stallion, the finest I ever saw. I have a fine horse of my own and it happens to be black, but the Captain isn't worth one of Satan's hoofs. And yet for all that I've never found a horse that could pass the Captain or outlast him.

"But the point of it was that Satan kept the strength of anything that is wild and free. You see? He served Dan, but he served him for love, you might say. Can you understand the difference? There *is* a difference.

"It took me a year to teach the Captain that it didn't pay to buck even if he threw me off, now and then. Now he lets me ride him, but he's waiting to get me at a disadvantage and tear me to bits."

"Why do you keep him?"

"Because he's the best horse in the mountains.

That's one reason. Another is that I think he's one of Satan's colts. I got him when he was a yearling, and he was in the mustang band that old Satan was still leading. Some of the old blood runs in him. And if he had another Dan Barry on his back—how can I tell?—he might be every bit as good as his father ever was!

"But to get back to Barry himself, I say he used to go around the country on the back of a horse he didn't need a bridle to handle and with a wolf trailing him and doing his errands—"

"How wonderful!" cried the girl; "oh, how wonderful!"

"You think so? A little bit terrible you would have found it, too, if you had seen them as I have seen them. I've watched them play a game, all three of them. Mind you, this was when they thought they were quite unwatched.

"Satan would trot away to a little distance. Then Black Bart attacked Dan—like a demon, with his fur bristling and his great teeth slashing the air a hair's breadth from Dan's face, who would fend the brute off with his hands, dancing here and there like the shadow of a leaf in a whirlpool of wind.

"And Satan would come to the rescue with the sun winking on him, and his mane blowing above his head; just a fraction of a second's pause at the scene of the fight—and then Dan had dived at him, caught him in some way around the neck and then twisted on to his back. So off they would go with

Black Bart after them, sailing through the air with his teeth aimed at Dan's throat—imagine catching a hundred and thirty pound wolf coming at you like an arrow with his own speed plus the speed of a racing horse! But that's what Dan Barry would do, and off they would go with Satan carrying both of them and thinking nothing whatever about it!"

"Ah," murmured the girl, "how beautiful and how free! Such a man could do no wrong!"

"Let me tell you what he did. I've been saying all this just to work up to the point. He married beautiful Kate Cumberland. He settled down. He forgot his wildness. They had a youngster. Mind you, I say that he forgot his wildness. Rather I should say that he kept putting the impulses behind him. But finally they broke loose again. Seven men chased him. Seven men killed the horse he was riding—it wasn't Satan—and Dan started to get the seven, one by one. He forgot Kate. He forgot the youngster. He went on a blood trail—"

"Why not?" cried the girl. "If Peter were killed—"

"But for the sake of a borrowed horse—to kill six men? That was why Kate left him. She still loved him, but she saw that she could not stay with him on account of their little girl.

"You see, Dan was willing to leave, but he couldn't bear to let the little girl stay behind him. And that wildness was beginning to show in the youngster. It drove her mother frantic with fear to see it; and

finally, while she was sitting in their cabin one night, she heard a whistling out in the night and she saw the little girl get up from the fire and cross the room and stand there with her baby face pressed against the glass and looking out into the night."

"She wanted to get to her father?"

"God knows! She'd have walked out into the teeth of wolves when she heard that whistle. And when Kate saw that look in the eyes of the baby, she knew—she knew—"

Here the voice of Lee Haines faltered and died away. The flame of the candle had leaped high and, pouring up a steady little stream of black smoke, it had rapidly eaten away the candle itself until now the fire was guttering, half inside the holder and half outside—so that the house was swept with alternate waves of light and shadow, and the only fixed point of illumination was a small circle on the ceiling.

It was in one of these passing shadows that Haines saw something in the face of the girl which shook his nerves. Or at least he thought he saw it; but when the flame spouted up again he changed his mind, only to see it once more when the shadow waved across them again.

"What's the matter?" she asked, frightened.

"Hold the candle higher!" he demanded.

She obeyed.

"Now," he said, his eyes great and shining as he watched her, "I was saying that the girl, when she

heard her father's whistling, went to the window and looked out and then she tried to climb up on the sill—"

His voice stopped again, and it seemed to Joan that he watched her with a fascinated horror.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Joan Daniels," she answered; "but tell me more about Dan Barry. It seems to me—I don't know why—it pours me full of wonder, happiness, fear, to hear you speak of him."

"What Daniels?" Haines persisted.

"Buck Daniels."

"What? He wasn't married fifteen years ago. How could he have a daughter of your age?"

"Do you know him?"

He disregarded the question.

"Tell me about your mother."

"She looked a little like me. I mean, she had yellow hair and blue eyes."

"And her name—"

"I told you before—it was Kate."

He had raised himself, tensed with the effort. Now he sank back, supine, with his eyes closed. And Joan leaned anxiously above him.

"What's wrong? Are you worse?" she cried.

"Worse every minute," he said calmly, without opening his eyes.

"I'll get help—"

"Stay close to me, Joan. I've only a minute or two left. I knew when I had one look at the place

that slug hit me that I was finished. I've seen too many wounds not to know. Don't go for help. The last thing I can do is to tell you a thing you ought to know."

She took his hands. By the force in her own young arms she seemed striving to drive new life into him.

"I saw it in your face," he murmured, "when the candle began to die—that same wild look I've seen in the face of your father—"

"Wild look—in dad's face?"

"Not Buck Daniels."

His next words were an obscure muttering. She leaned closer and she heard him saying:

"Dan Barry's girl was named Joan. His wife was named Kate, and you—"

He drew a great breath, and then his eyes fixed blankly upon the shattered roof of the cabin.

CHAPTER XVII

HARE AND HOUNDS

THE sheriff's roan was as trim a gelding as ever jogged across desert sands, and if it came to a dash over good going he had a turn of speed which would make a rival sick in half a mile of work. So that, during the first ten minutes of his ride, Harry Gloucester watched his progress with the utmost satisfaction and heard the noise of the pursuit beat away into the distance.

But he presently discovered that the roan was beginning to slacken his efforts. His gallop was losing its elasticity, and his fore hoofs struck the earth with a lifeless beat which meant a very great deal to the rider. He recalled the sheriff—a lean and sun withered man who might well be fifty pounds lighter than himself. Perhaps it was his weight which was killing the roan. Perhaps it was the great speed with which he had covered the first two miles out from the town. No doubt, both causes combined. But he presently was sure that he had killed the speed of the mount.

He drew to a walk and dropped out of the saddle.

The instant he struck the ground he saw how much worse matters were than he had dreamed. He had to draw the roan along by the reins. The poor animal dragged back on the bit with dull eyes and flagging ears, and his hoofs trailed in the dust; and he got his wind back with amazing slowness.

For a blown horse is not like a blown man. Many a good athlete runs himself to a faint in a half mile race, lies ten minutes flat on his back, consciously relaxing every muscle, and then arises to run a mile event and win it. But when the ribs of a horse begin to heave in a certain manner, his flanks ballooning in and out, and when his head begins to jerk down at every stride, a rest of a few minutes does him little good.

The roan was not yet in this completely run out condition; he had something left, but it tortured Gloster to think of squeezing the last of life out of the beast.

He continued walking until a dull and muffled pounding was plainly audible behind him, and he knew that the pursuers were gaining fast. Then he brought the roan to a trot and went forward at a smart clip, with the gelding beside him. Perhaps he covered a mile in this fashion, but by that time the noise from the rear was very distinct and he dared not linger any more.

In the meanwhile, although the roan was by no means recovered from the effects of that heavy weight in the saddle and the terrific pace of the first

two miles, at least it was no longer pulling back on the bridle; and when Gloster, somewhat winded by his efforts on foot, climbed into the saddle again, the horse went off at a trot.

A trot, indeed, was all that could be reasonably managed in the soft silt of the desert. It was muffling the noise of those who came behind. But from what he heard, Gloster knew that they had spread out in a thin, long line, and were coming straight down his trail. They had heard his retreat over the harder ground nearer the town; and now he would be lucky indeed if he managed to get out of sight before the light of the dawn began.

An arroyo crossed his way. He dropped into it with a sigh of relief and raised the gelding to a gallop again. A moment later the dry ravine was filled with a clamoring as the whole posse swung in behind him, and, with the good footing beneath them, they gained upon him at an appalling rate.

Five minutes would see the finish of that race. No—less time than that. They were sweeping around a curve just behind and in ten seconds they would have full view of him. And a view by the clear starlight would be almost as good as a view in the day. Certainly they would open with their guns, and his own thigh was weighted by no revolver, to say nothing of a rifle under his leg.

He swung out of the saddle, balanced his weight on one stirrup for an instant, and then dropped to the ground. The tired gelding would have dropped

back to a trot at once. The gentle beast even tried to halt and return to its late rider; but Gloster scooped out a handful of pebbles, sent the horse flying on with the force of them, and then threw himself back against the wall of the ravine.

He was plainly enough visible. The arroyo was not wide, and the stars were deadly bright. He could only hope that, by drawing the brim of his sombrero over his face, and flattening himself against the wall, he would not be seen as the front of the posse rolled by.

They came now, with three or four eager riders rushing in the lead and riding all the harder as they heard the beat of hoofs from their quarry so short a distance before them. These were no short winded sprinters, overburdened by riders of unusual weight. Every one was the favorite mount of the fellow who bestrode it. At least, so they appeared to Gloster; and they rode like avenging whirlwinds.

On they pushed, and then raised a yell, for down the cañon ahead of them the noise of the gelding's gallop had fallen away to a trot.

"Scatter, boys!" yelled the commanding voice of Sheriff Sim Hargess. He had recovered quickly from his hurt and joined in this work to revenge his disgrace. "That devil is slowin' up to fight. Shoot straight when you see him—"

His voice was blotted out by the roar of hoofs as the main body of the posse rode past. In a few more seconds they would find that he was not with

the gelding; then a brief search as they scattered in all directions, and finally he must be taken back to prison, trussed up like a calf.

There were forty men in that group, and in the rear came two or three stragglers. One, it appeared, had fallen behind because something had gone wrong with his cinches. At any rate, he was now overtaking the main body hand over hand.

With a secret pang Gloster saw the wide shoulders of that horse working. With such a mount to carry him—

He leaped from his place with a shout. The racing horse, seeing this sudden apparition, snorted and, throwing back its weight, tried to swerve away. That was the moment that Gloster chose for leaping. In spite of its efforts to stop, the horse was dashing away at a smart pace, and the double impact of the speed of the horse and Gloster's leap was all transferred to the luckless rider.

He was smitten from his place as cleanly as any champion in the olden days picked an enemy out of the saddle in the lists and sent him crashing to the ground.

Down he went, and into his place in the saddle slipped Harry Gloster, with a new lease of life if he could take advantage of all the chances. But that would be no easy thing to do. To be sure, the whole posse had whirled past him; to be sure, they were now somewhat tangled in a mass farther down the arroyo, while the leaders were yelling

that Gloster was not on the sheriff's roan, and some of the members were still pushing ahead, not having seen what happened to the rear.

But those horses were nearly all out of the great school of the cow ranges. They could turn on a ten cent piece, and it was nothing to weave a way through a crowd of horses, compared with working a calf out from the packed herd.

In their scrambling start Harry Gloster gained some thirty or forty lengths. He might have gained even more. But he had learned one lesson this night, and he was not apt to kill off his mount by too much sprinting in the beginning of a long run.

He saw a narrow cattle path going up the side of the arroyo. Up this he went. The posse stormed after him. They were far too impatient to go up the path one by one; so they crashed up the steep bank with plying spurs and many oaths. There were three falls and a thousand curses, but in a few seconds all were over the edge and headed into the plain beyond.

Nevertheless, they had taken more out of their horses in that brief group of seconds than in a mile of hard running. That handicap might balance the weight of Gloster in the saddle.

So, at least, he hoped. And after the next furious half mile, in which he barely managed to hold them even, his hopes increased. Some of them were using their guns, pumping shot after shot in

his direction. But he did not mind this. There was hardly more than a chance in a thousand that a bullet would strike home from a revolver fired at night from galloping horses. Even in the daylight he had seen many pounds of ammunition wasted in a similar fashion. Their shooting would simply make them ride slower.

For his own part, he was jockeying his horse with the utmost care, swaying with every stride, leaning to cut the pressure of the wind. Yet all this would not do. They began to gain again. The firing stopped. There was a period of fierce and silent riding, and then he saw that they were creeping up steadily on either flank.

Desperately he looked about him. Had he a gun, he might have driven them back to arm's length and given a chance for some sort of maneuvering. But now all he could do was to use up the last strength of the mustang in a final burst.

Where should he direct his flight? East of him the ground fell away, and the down slope was one temptation. Going down hill his weight would not tell so much against the laboring horse that carried him. And in the hollow there was a long line of trees. Willows, no doubt, were most of them, but they could give him shelter, and if he could gain that screen they would hunt him cautiously. How could they tell that he had no gun, and even if he had one, that he was determined not to use it?

He flattened himself along the neck of his mount,

drove home the spurs, and felt the gallant mustang pour out the strength of his heart in the final effort. Down the hill they raced, drawing away from the clustered men of the posse at every jump. A bullet sung at his ear, followed by the crack of the report. And then the trees were before him with the rush of the hard riders just behind. They passed the screen of the first trees. The others entered with a roar.

He kicked his feet out of both stirrups, halted the horse on braced and sliding hoofs, true cow pony fashion, and then swung himself up onto an overhanging branch. A touch of the rowel as he pulled himself up sent the horse on at a fresh gallop, and, lying on the limb, he saw the others rush past him.

He waited until the last had gone by. Then he dropped to the ground and started back, doubling on his tracks and running as he had never run before. If he could gain the top of the rising ground before they found the riderless horse and came back to look for him, he might be able to get a sufficient distance and disappear in the night, but he was scarcely out of the willows when he heard the yell which announced that his second mount of that night had been found.

On he ran. The ground had appeared firm enough when his mustang was racing down the incline, and the slope slight enough. But now his boots were slipping in sand, and the slope was like

a mountain side rolling up against the stars. A short, quick step, driving down on a flat foot, was what he must use.

So he toiled with all his might, grinding his teeth at the constant slipping. He reached the crest. His body would show there against the sky line as if he were a house. So he dropped flat and looked back in time to see the posse come boiling out from the trees.

They scattered here and there, rode toward him, then turned and rode back again. Plainly they did not know what to do, and then he heard the voice of the sheriff as plainly as if the latter had been at his elbow.

"Scatter down the trees. Five of you—you five there!—ride down a mile, then cut through the trees and start working down toward me. Five more ride up a mile and do the same thing. Half a dozen more go through to the opposite side and watch, scattered out. The rest of us will stay here. Take your rifles, boys. If you do any talking, make it short. If you start shooting when you see him, you won't get hanged for it. Now go!"

They were off with yells, and Harry Gloster, lying flat on the sand and gasping in his breath, shuddered with thankfulness. Had he indeed tried to hide in the willows, they would have closed in on him and crushed out his life. Half an hour would have ended him.

He waited to see no more, but crawled a hundred

yards on his hands and knees until he was over the ridge and until the voices from the hollow came small and faint to him. Then he arose to his feet and struck away across the sand at a dog trot. He had learned that trick of running from the Indians, who will keep up their dog trot under a furnace of a sun and cover a hundred miles in twenty-four hours, running down horse and man. To be sure, he could not match the Indians, but at least he could run astonishingly well for a man of his bulk.

For a full five miles he did not slacken; then, as the wind freshened to the north and west, coming full in his face, he dropped to a walk, but kept steadily on. He could only pray the wind might rise to a gale and wash sand across his trail, but he crossed firm ground in spots here and there, and those spots, he well knew, would be found, and in every one his footprints would be like arrows pointing out the direction of his flight to the sheriff.

And the picture of Sim Hargess came before him again, sun withered, wrinkled, and light of limb, as though he had been fashioned on purpose to live in a land of little rain. He was made for the country just as the beasts and birds were made for it. To attempt to escape from him would be like attempting to escape from Nemesis.

A shadow formed against the sky to his right. He dropped to his knees that he might view it more clearly and at a better angle, and it appeared to him that there was a sharpness of outline which could

only come from a house. He turned straight toward it, and in a few minutes he was sure.

A little later and he saw the whole cluster of the ranch buildings. It grew in distinctness, and now he put on his best speed. For, as he glanced behind him, he saw that a light was winking on the desert, then other lights, like a swarm of distant fireflies of a giant size. He understood what they meant. They had been using their pocket electric torches to find his trail, and, having found it, they were doubtless tracking him across the desert almost as fast as their horses could gallop.

If the wise old sheriff could do all this by night, how long would Gloster have lasted by the day? He thought of this as he ran, and it gave him a great burst of speed, for he carried his bulk as lightly as any track athlete.

By the time he reached the barns and sheds of the ranch the lights had disappeared behind him. They had made up their minds that he was breaking for the sheds, and, for that matter, he did not need the light to tell him of the rate of their approach, for now in the starlight he could make out the indistinct forms of the horsemen, a great blot of shadow coming rapidly over the sands.

He found the saddles after a brief search in one of the sheds. And with saddle and bridle over his arm he ran out into the corral. The horses milled before him; but he pressed resolutely in, regardless of possible flying heels, for in the distance the beat

of hoofs was growing and he could hear a voice calling—that must be the sheriff—"Spread out! Spread out!"

He crowded a horse into a corner and in a moment had the saddle and bridle on it. Then he let down the bars to the corral. They would have their work cut out for them if they tried to catch fresh mounts to follow him, while those mustangs had a thousand acre field to run in. He yelled, and the horses poured through the gap and away into freedom, snorting and tossing their heels in the air.

Other shouts came from the posse as they understood the meaning of the tumult from the corral. He saw a scattered line of horsemen spurring as hard as they could to surround him, and then he gave his pony the reins.

It was all over in two minutes. The fagged mounts of the posse dropped almost instantly behind him; their guns began to pop at random—sure sign that they were beaten on this stage of the hunt, at the least.

CHAPTER XVIII

HALF QUEEN AND HALF CHILD

It did not matter that they were long overdue at home, Peter was sent slowly home that night. For, now and again, Joan was blinded to the way, recalling how Harry Gloster had come thundering out of the jail with the splinters of the broken door showering about him, and how he had beaten the three men to the earth and thrown one of them into the face of the crowd which was attacking.

Whenever she thought of these things she could not help twisting suppositions back and forth in her mind, striving to understand how he could have been so near to mortal danger and yet could have escaped without a serious injury. It was almost as if the sheriff and his men had loaded their weapons with blank cartridges. But if they had, Lee Haines would still be living.

Dan Barry, Black Bart, Satan, Joe Cumberland—there was hardly an end to the procession of figures which had been crowded into her mind by the talk with Haines. The tears came when she recalled how calmly and hopelessly he had met his

end, and how smoothly he had persuaded her that it was only a trifling wound. Now, when they found him, he would be thrown into a nameless grave.

When she came in sight of the house her fear of Buck Daniels was gone forever. She rode with reckless noise past the house, and Buck himself came running out. She did not heed his challenging shout, but went blithely on to the corral, where she unsaddled Peter and brought to him an ample feed of grain. It was not until she had finished all these things that she went back to the ranch-house.

Buck Daniels walked in front of it, up and down, up and down, with a glow of light from his pipe now and again showing the storm in his face. She called to him, received no answer, and went into the kitchen. She was hard at work getting her supper when the door banged heavily, sending a long series of murmurs and squeaks like strange echoes through the house. Buck stood before her with war in his face.

"Well," he said, "what have you got to say for yourself?"

She smiled across the stove at him.

"I said 'Hello' when I came in from the corral."

"Hell!" said Buck Daniels, and clamped his teeth together to keep back worse words than this. It was apparent that her smile had done more harm to his peace of mind than her words, although they had been airily independent enough.

"What have you been doing?"

"Finding out the price of Peter."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean five hundred dollars. That's what he's worth."

"You've sold him?"

"Yes."

"Without asking me?"

"I bought him back again."

"Joan, what the devil is in you?"

She shrugged her shoulders and went on with her work. Fried potatoes and a great slice of ham and a mighty cup of coffee and hot milk would not be too much for her.

"You been riding to a fall, Joan, and now dog-gone me if the time ain't come when you got to hear some talk that ain't going to be like any other talk you ever heard! In the first place what I want—"

"Hush!" whispered Joan.

She raised her hand, and into the silence which she had interposed floated the shrill crying of the wild geese as some thick wedge of them fled up the northern sky. It was a marvelous music to Joan. It chimed and echoed in her very heart of hearts.

She even opened the door, but as she stood there against the outer blackness of the night, looking northward to the sky, Buck caught at her shoulder and drew her back into the room. He closed the door hastily and stood with his shoulders braced

against it. His eyes were a little wide, as he faced her, and she thought that there was still a slight tremor of the upper lip as if, the instant before, he had received a great shock.

But she was too filled with great memories this evening to pay much attention to Buck and his ideas of her. The careless smoothness with which she spoke to him was the only tone possible to her. If she had tried to speak soberly, she would have burst into tears and been unable to proceed.

She would have turned back to the stove, but he caught her and stopped her again.

"I've had hell two nights hand running on account of you," he told her, "and I'm damned if I'm going to have it again. Understand?"

She did not answer. She hardly heard the words he had thundered at her.

"Joan! Where have you been?"

"With a man."

"I knew it!" he groaned. "I knew it. Who?"

"A man you know."

"And he hasn't seen the last of me whoever he is!"

"Lee Haines was his name."

It was a strong name, indeed. It seemed to have the strength of a club to strike down Buck Daniels. He fumbled, found a chair, and lowered himself into it without taking his glance from her face.

"What did Lee tell you? Where is he? Where did you meet him? What did he tell you, Joan?"

"He told me about my father."

It was a second blow and it made him drop his face in his hands. She stood over him, trembling with anger.

"You've kept it away from me all these years, and what right had you to do that? I've lived in the center of a lie!"

He made a gesture as though brushing her words away to get at something more important.

"Did he tell you how—how your father died, Joan?"

"All but that," she answered.

"Thank God!"

"But I'll find it out! I'll find out every word that can be known about him!"

"Joan, I won't let you. We start back East to-morrow. I've made arrangements. We're going to go—"

"Not a step!" she cried. "Oh, do you think I'd give him up? I've been cheated of him all this time, but I'm going to make it up!"

He arose and began to pace the room, swinging through it, back and forth, with an uneven step as his thoughts spurred and checked him. But at last he stopped short and faced her.

"I've got to tell you things I been praying all this time that you wouldn't hear. I'll tell it short, because I ain't got the strength to tell all the small things that go into the making of it. When your father died—when Dan Barry died," he began, his

words coming forth haltingly, "I went to Kate—your mother. I told her I wanted to help, and she told me that the great thing to be done was to take you out of a country where Dan had lived and get you into a new place where folks had never heard of him.

"She wanted to go East, but I showed her that there wasn't enough money between us to support us in the East in a city. But there was enough to start a small ranch. That was what we done. We came away down here and got this place between us, and the best way to cover up tracks seemed to be for her and you to take my name."

"She didn't marry you after he died, then?"

"When he died, she died," said Daniels. "That is, all except that part of her that was wrapped up in you. And that part kept her alive for a few years. But she was more'n half dead. You remember how quiet she was—wouldn't speak through a whole day, maybe, except to give you your lessons?"

"Yes. And when she walked around the house, I used to feel, sometimes, as though she were afraid of the noise she was making."

"But I remember her as happy as sunshine, full of singing and laughing. Made people smile just to see her pass. All that had died out of her when Dan was gone. You never knew more'n the shadow of your mother, Joan. And when she come to die, she begged me to take you away from the West as soon as I could—"

He paused for a moment, then went on again.

"She begged me to keep the name of your father away from you—"

A great new thought had come to Joan.

"But how could she ask you to do all these things if you—if you were not even my stepfather?"

"Because she knew that I loved her, Joan, more than I loved God or feared the devil. She knew that she could trust me for her sake to do my best for you, and I've done it, Joan, as well as I could, but I guess that I ain't done more than to make you unhappy—"

"Don't!" gasped Joan. "Oh, when I think how patient and how gentle you've been—when I think of that and how you've—"

Tears flooded down her face.

"I've done no more than any man would of done for her," he insisted calmly. "There was never a woman like her before and there'll never be another like her again. You're a pretty girl, Joan. You've got a stronger mind and a stronger body than she had. But she was sort of half queen and half child, and between them two things she worked on the heart of a man till he'd die to give her one happy day."

"And Dan Barry?" she asked. "Did it help you to hate him because you loved my mother so much?"

"Joan, the other day I was telling you about one man in all my life that was a friend to me."

"I'll never forget what you said. It seemed as though I'd never known you until you told me that!"

"Well, Dan Barry was that man. Does that help you to understand?"

Again she was stricken dumb. She had gone for years feeling that the most prosaic man in the world was this same fellow she had called "dad," but now she discovered enough to make her think of endless possibilities in him. And, indeed, she suspected that he belonged to a former generation which was bolder, stronger, more noble than the people among whom she lived.

He was saying now: "But I've never forgotten that as Kate died she asked me to take you East as soon as I could. I've been saving and scraping ever since. And though I ain't got quite enough together, we can make it do. I can find work of some sort that will pay—all I want is your promise to try to go on doing what your mother wanted you to do."

And Joan, drying her eyes, was about to answer in the affirmative when, through the open kitchen window, the faint calling of the northbound wild geese floated into the room, a chill and dissonant sound. It stopped her voice.

Buck Daniels, with a stifled oath, strode to the window and slammed it down to shut out those wild voices, but the old building was full of rifts and cracks which served now as ears. He himself

could hear nothing, but he knew from the quivering lips and the far-seeing eyes of the girl that she still was listening.

"Joan!" he called roughly.

She roused herself with a start.

"Yes?"

"I want your answer. You're going with me, Joan?"

She hesitated.

"There ain't nothing more sacred than the wish of a dying mother, Joan!"

But, instead of answering, her head bent back a little, her glance roved far past him, and he knew that her thoughts were flying north and north lighted by a newly risen moon.

CHAPTER XIX

THE UNCONQUERABLE CAPTAIN

CHARLIE PURVIS donated his big corral for the show. It contained nearly an acre, surrounded with a lofty and solid fence. On the outside of that fence leaned the men and the women; the youngsters were perched on the top rail; for the entire population had turned out to witness the contest. For the quality of the combatants was known.

Now and again eyes turned to a rear window of the Purvis house. Stretched in agony on his bed, with three ribs smashed in, a great scalp wound furrowing his head, and his left arm fractured in three places, Charlie Purvis could still turn his head and see the battle through his window. It was for that reason that he had donated the corral, as every one knew. He had tried to ride the Captain the day before, and now he wanted to see some other hero conquer where he had failed—or fail and perhaps pay a penalty almost as grim as his own.

The picked riders of the county had gathered for the testing. There were a score who had courage enough to make an attempt to conquer the great

black stallion. And there were three famous horsemen who were believed to have an excellent chance of riding the big devil. These were Lefty Gilmore, Sam Ricks, and Champ Hudson, men of genius, every one, when it came to the governing of a pitching horse.

Now entered the great antagonist, dragged along by a half dozen ropes twisted over the saddle horns of tugging cow ponies. He came raging and rearing, already dripping with sweat so that the sun glittered and shimmered and washed in waves of blinding light along his sides. He had done a day's work in the passage from the stable behind the hotel to the field of action, and yet it was plain to see that his mettle had simply been aroused by what he had already done.

"He's ready to go!" cried a chorus of the spectators. And there was a little shivering cry of admiration and fear from the women, old and young, for there was enough fiend in the huge animal to thrill them with wonder and with terror at the same time.

It was said that after Lee Haines died, the stallion had been suddenly changed, so that from perfect docility he passed at a step into the most demoniacal temper. It might have been explained that he simply was ill at ease in the hands of a stranger and that he naturally expressed his nervousness with his heels and his teeth.

But no one cared to have a commonplace explan-

ation of an extraordinary thing. It was believed that there was an unearthly connection between the mind of the horse and the mind of the dead master so that the moment the latter passed away the rebellious soul of the stallion arose in a struggle for freedom.

And the horse gained the more significance when the town came to know more about the identity of this Lee Haines. They had found him dead in a little shack among the trees, laid out with his eyes closed, his weary face composed, and his hands folded calmly upon his breast. Someone had been with him when he passed away. Who could it have been? No one could guess. And that was another added element of the mystery.

But that was not all. When they examined his effects, it was found that he carried a wallet, on the inside of which were the half obliterated initials of a farmer who had been one of his victims in a celebrated train robbery three years before, who had resisted being plundered and who had been killed. It started people on a new train of thought.

The authorities sent out a flood of telegrams and very soon they began to learn startling things—that this man was no other than the same Lee Haines who had, seventeen or eighteen years before, ridden in the outlaw gang of Jim Silent; and they gathered additional information to the effect that he was one of a famous band which, for a number of years, had been operating up and down the mountains.

It was even believed that he was the leader of the outfit.

What desperate considerations could have led him to take his life in his hands and appear in open daylight in the center of a town was another mystery. His reason must have been good or else the value which he placed upon his life must have been small.

There was still another conclusion. Harry Gloster must have been an ally or even a member of Haines's gang. That was why Haines had thrown himself away in the effort to rescue the younger man. What other explanation could there have been? And was it not known that solemn vows of mutual fidelity held outlaws one to another?

So that, in the days following the death of Haines, his name began to acquire greater and greater significance. And when the posse returned from the long and fruitless pursuit of Gloster, a work which had been taken up by the sheriff of the adjoining county, they found the home town humming with excitement, as if the jail delivery were only a day old.

And some of the significance of Haines himself was passed on to his very horse. They had identified Lee with a long life of successful crime, and here was his horse, a king of beasts as his master had been a king among men. Was it not natural to graft the qualities of the one upon the other?

And when the Captain came plunging into the

corral, looking so mighty and so swift and terrible that the strong ropes which held him appeared no more than intangible spider threads, another picture darted into the minds of those who beheld the sight. They saw Lee Haines, outlaw and gun-fighter, raging through a battle.

Only to Joan it suggested something else. She had come among the last. She did not actually advance to the fence until the Captain entered the lists and every eye was so fastened upon him that she ran small risk of being closely observed. But then, having found her place behind the bars, she looked through and saw a thing which was more terrible and wonderful to her than had been even the spectacle of Lee Haines and Harry Gloster breaking out of the crowd and smashing their way through the night to freedom.

She did not think of the Captain as a mere horse when he first entered. Peter was her idea of a horse, gentle, sweet tempered, faithful. She could rule him with a whisper. The least pressure of her knee would swerve him. But, after all, Peter was a born servant. He would obey any other man or woman in the world almost as well as he would obey her. And he could have lived happily enough in the stall of a purchaser.

But here was quite another story. To see the Captain, one wondered how he could have ever been controlled by mere bridle and saddle. For he was a giant. By actual rule he might not have stood

more than sixteen hands and two inches. But he seemed a full hand taller; he dwarfed the cow horses to puny insignificance; for his soul was greater than his body.

One could not conceive and remember him in such a background, tied with ropes and surrounded by gaping people in a fenced inclosure; for seeing him, one thought of windy mountains, of far ridges thrown like waves against the sky, or of vast deserts which his matchless speed and endurance turned into a pasture lot. One saw him as a king should be, the wild, free leader of a herd of his own kind.

A dozen men now attacked him, moving behind a screen of their own trained but frightened saddle horses. They pressed close. Then they darted out. He was snared with new ropes. Men clung to his writhing, pitching body like dangling ants.

One went down with a yell of pain, twisted over and over in the dust, and was then dragged away by helping hands. They carried him off the field. His shoulder had been horribly crushed by a tap of those flying forehoofs.

And Joan remembered what Haines had told her of her father and Satan. It seemed to her that she could see Dan Barry seated on the back of that struggling giant of a horse, could watch the Captain quieted and subdued by the strange touches of her father's hand, the stranger touches of his voice.

Ah, for such a power as he had had! To sit like

a king on a throne with this indomitable soul at one's command! Not a slave like mild mannered Peter beneath the saddle, but a free companion. There was the great difference. To own the confidence of the Captain meant the taking on of wings, the collapsing of distances.

And an ache of desire entered her heart. Not a passing hurt of longing, but an irresistible passion took hold of her. She looked down to her hands, slender, childish, and the small, round wrists. Truly, she was impotent. It would need Hercules himself to conquer the Captain.

She watched the progress of the work not as a fair contest but as a picture, terrible and beautiful beyond words. There was no hope for the men. She knew that. Vaguely she heard, here and there, voices of men calling out wagers that Lefty or Champ or Sam would stick in the saddle so many minutes; or that one of them would ride the black to a finish. She heard them, but she regarded them not.

They were strong men and dexterous men, but there was not strength or skill enough in all three were they rolled into one man to subdue the stallion. It took forty minutes to snub the nose of the horse to a saddle horn and then to saddle and to bridle him, though experts were doing the work. But eventually Sam Ricks was thrown up into the saddle, the hood was jerked from the eyes of the Captain, and he was gone!

Not uncontrolled by others, however. Three ropes were still fastened to him. He had to tug against those ropes and buck at the same time. And he managed it!

Sam Ricks had appeared a famous man when he first settled onto the leather. But he began to shrink and shrink as the black horse struggled. He became a little child clinging to the straps. His hat had blown off. His long hair was lifted and shaken by the wind. And even across the corral, Joan saw the terror in his face.

It could not last long. The Captain was not a horse. He was ten black panthers compacted in one. And bounding like a rubber ball, twisting like a flashing snake of light, he shook one of Sam's feet out of a stirrup. In vain the cow-puncher sank his spur in the thick cinch.

Another buck, a yell from Sam, and he was snapped out of his seat as a child squeezes out a watermelon seed between thumb and forefinger. He landed far off in the dirt. And at him went the Captain with a rush, his mouth gaping, his mane flying above his flattened ears.

The yell of horror from the crowd crashed against her ears, but she felt no horror herself. It was all a natural thing. If men will venture into the den of the tiger, they must expect the tiger's teeth and claws.

Then the ropes drew taut, the great horse was stopped, staggered. And, of an instant, he ceased

fighting and let men drag away the senseless form of Sam Ricks.

The Captain drew himself up with that blown mane and arching tail, his beautiful head high, his ears pricking, his eyes fixed far off where the play of the heat waves turned the distant mountains into nebulous, half living things.

CHAPTER XX

SPIRIT OF THE HEIGHTS

JOAN followed the direction of that stare, and a door opened somewhere in her heart. She understood now what she would not have understood that morning a half hour earlier. All was as clear to her as if the stallion had spoken words.

And by that understanding a bond was established between them. Watching him half in worship, half in sympathy, she found her fear diminishing. He drew her with a great power of which she was half afraid, from time to time, as though there were a black magic in it.

Now they were at him again in a worrying cloud, and he sprang into action, fighting back desperately, magnificently. But that lasted only a moment. He seemed to realize that hopeless odds were against him and became perfectly docile.

She watched him being led back to the waiting horses. She saw his nose snubbed against the pommel of another saddle. She saw the celebrated Lefty Gilmore hobble out to mount, for his legs had been broken so many times that they were

twisted out of shape. They seemed like mechanical pieces.

His feet were fixed in the stirrups now. The hood was snatched from the head of the Captain and, instead of the burst of pitching, he remained quiet, looking curiously about him as if he did not even know that there was a man on his back.

It brought a gasp of wonder from the crowd. And beside Joan a man began to sing out: "Good boy, Lefty! You're better than coin in the pocket—"

Here his voice was cut away, and the Captain was seen to leave the ground without visible crouching and preparation. He simply shot away into the air, landed on stiff legs, a shock that swayed Lefty to the side, swaying far out, and before he had recovered his position the stallion was in the air again. When he landed, Lefty kept on traveling. He struck a dozen feet away and, like Sam Ricks, he did not stir to rise.

This time, however, there was apparently no need of ropes to hold back the Captain. He became oblivious of his rider the instant the man was out of the saddle.

And as patiently as before, he allowed himself to be led back and held while Champ Hudson flung himself into the saddle. The other two had been good riders. But Champ Hudson was one of those poetic figures who raise riding to a sort of chivalric height. He was desperate, now.

Joan could see his mouth set in a straight line and could imagine the glare of his eyes as he told them to turn the stallion loose. But she watched what followed with a calm unconcern. They could not tame the Captain.

Even Lee Haines had dreaded the horse to the last, and he was a man of a greater force than any of these. But force was not what could beat the Captain. He must be won, not conquered.

In the meantime this battle gave her a chance to see him in action, and it was a picture worth a year of waiting. It was longer this time. Some of the furious power was gone from the Captain. The long struggle against the ropes and then against the two previous riders had sapped some of his strength.

For two long minutes Champ Hudson sat the saddle "straight up"; for another minute he remained pulling leather with might and main. And then he was catapulted from his place. The fight was over, and man was defeated for the moment. He would come back to the assault later on.

Joan knew well enough that a brute beast could not win in the end. They might starve him to weakness and then ride him—there were a dozen tricks which they might try. They might in the end even break his spirit. But as she watched him being led away she felt that he would break his heart first in revolt against all tyranny.

How had Lee Haines managed it, she wondered?

In the first place he had caught the big fellow when he was only a yearling colt. And doubtless he had consumed an immense amount of time and patience. Even so, his conquest, by his own confession, had been incomplete and he had felt that the great brute would murder him sooner or later.

The crowd streamed on behind to watch the Captain after he had been unsaddled and restored to the little corral behind the hotel stable, where he was kept as county property. There they stayed for half an hour or so.

But the Captain stood like a statue and paid no attention to them. Not even a portion of hay could win a glance from him, but with his head raised high he looked over their heads and at the distant peaks.

Men cannot bear to be snubbed; not even by a dumb beast. And in a half hour the watchers had their fill of it. They broke up suddenly, as if a command had been given, and in another moment they were gone.

Joan alone remained leaning against the big gate post. She was perfectly content. For, watching the stallion, she was seeing the mountains with his eyes, and seeing the mountains, she was guessing at a thousand unborn happinesses which might be found there if one could see and know.

Presently the Captain put down his head to the hay, but with the first wisp gathered into his teeth he jerked up with a snort and bounded back across

half the breadth of the small inclosure. He had seen her after having forgotten that there was a human being.

Now he came rapidly toward her for a few steps, paused, came closer, halted again. His eyes were on fire. And whether with anger or fear, all his big body was trembling.

It filled Joan with awe. He had been huge enough in the distance; but as he drew nearer, his great nostrils expanded and quivering, and with his ears pricked and his head high, he seemed to loom like a mountain above her—a mountain of beauty and strength.

She put out her hand. He was instantly across the corral and, turning in a whirl of dust, looked defiance and fear back at her. Yes, it was manifestly fear. All in all, it was a marvelously strange thing that he should have endured the scrutiny of a whole crowd without flinching, and then should have become as skittish as a mustang colt that has never seen a human being, simply because a harmless girl was standing at the gate of his inclosure.

But she remained there with her hand extended, and she spoke to him. He snorted, shook his head with an almost human semblance of denial, and backed still farther away until his rump came against the barn wall and he could retreat no farther. It was as if a fawn should make a lion crawl growling back to his den.

Joan smiled a little, but there was something

deeper than smiles could express in her heart, for between the brute mind and the woman mind a current of electric communion was in operation.

Now he deliberately turned his back on her and approached the hay to eat. But it was only a semblance of eating. That prehensile upper lip had not gathered a single wisp when he whirled and confronted her with a snort. One would have thought that he had heard the whistle of the cow-puncher's rope over his back.

She spoke to him again, and once more it was as though she had touched him with fire. This time he plunged around the corral at full speed, bucking and dancing and shaking his head, and snapping an imaginary rider from his back, then whirling like a tiger and tearing the victim to shreds.

When he had demonstrated his powers and when the white dust cloud of his raising had dissipated somewhat, he began to stalk toward her. There was no other word for it. His long and soundless steps were taken with a sinister care, like those of a great cat which crouches to its belly and works through the grass. More than once he stopped.

As he came closer he flattened his ears, and she saw the upper lip twitching back over white teeth. And for all his size and beauty, he made her think of a wolf. But she could not turn away, even when he was so close that a rush forward would bring him unescapably upon her.

It was a danger which she could not fail to

appreciate, seeing what she had seen in the Purvis corral not long before. Yet it was a sweet pleasure to take fire in her hand and watch it burn.

Moreover, greater than her fear was a joy in her knowledge of what passed in the mind of the brute. She knew it as by revelation. She could judge all the cunning which was used to disarm her by a gentle approach. She could guess at the savage hatred of man which was in the stallion; she could guess at it so perfectly that she shook from head to foot with an intense sympathy.

Now, towering close before her, his nose came to her hand. There he paused for a few long seconds, and Joan began to talk. She had no idea of what she said, but she knew that she must keep on saying something, anything, in a certain voice which she had never used before but which came to her by inspiration.

New chords in her throat were touched by those low tones. The quality of the speech affected all her body with a sort of physical pleasure and sense of power.

It was affecting the stallion in the same way, she knew, even before he gave a sign. But at last one ear pricked, and the other wavered forward. He sniffed cautiously at the extended hand—and then she left him. It was very hard to do, but she knew that it was wisest to go away before the great horse should be wearied by the strain of that peculiar war which had been going on between them.

She went back to the side of the stable, sat down on a box, and remained there for a whole long hour with her arms locked around her knees, holding a sort of holy pleasure in her heart so that it kept her smiling for reasons which she knew not.

After a time she would go back to him. And presently she noticed an oddly shaped shadow stealing along the ground toward her as the sun sloped west and westward. She looked up, and there stood the Captain watching her around the corner of the barn. She arose and went to him, and although he flinched back, he did not retreat. Not even from her extended hand did he flee, but let it touch his nose—let it stroke him—let it wander higher and higher up his head until the slender brown fingers lay squarely between his eyes.

Not that he was entirely passive. She read a constantly changing story of suspicion, hatred, wonder, shuddering fear and joy in his eyes. He shrank away by fits and starts, and came back gingerly to her touch and to the sound of her voice. For the hand alone was almost powerless, but hand and voice together seemed to be two great magnets whose power he could not resist.

It was the happiest moment of Joan's life. The touch of that silken coat was more to her than the flowing of gold coins through the fingers of a miser.

She looked past him to the pile of hay. It was undisturbed. He had not touched it after she went, as she thought, out of his sight, but following to

the corner of the corral he had been watching her from the very first until the sun brought his shadow beside her.

It was wise to let well enough alone. She knew that the stallion would never forget her. She needed no one to tell her that she had already gained far more impression upon him than ever Lee Haines had done. And now it would be wisdom to go; and so, of course, she stayed.

The temptation of the contrast was too great. She had seen him raging like a lion among strong men not so very long before. Now, if she should dare to stand inside his corral, and if he did not attack her with teeth and hoofs—

If she had waited to think it over, she would never have found the courage. But the first strong impulse made her bend over and slip between the heavy bars of the fence. There she stood at last on the farther side of the corral, to be sure, but with nothing but thin air between her and the man-killer.

But there was no danger. There was not an instant of doubt in her mind the moment she faced him, and presently he came shrinking forward, stopped in the middle of the corral, and raising his head toward those distant mountains, now growing blue with the afternoon shadows, he neighed a soft complaint.

CHAPTER XXI

FREE PINIONS

SHE did not think of it at the time, for her mind was filled brim full of delight, and there was no place for thought. And, all the time she was in the corral until she watched the Captain begin eating the hay with as little fear of her as if she had not been one of the human species, she was too busy with his beauty and his pride and his grace, and above all else with the sense of overwhelming power which had drawn him to her and drawn her to him with a telepathy as subtle as that which draws together two humans.

If any other ideas came to her at that time, they were of her father. For her father's horse had sired this stallion; and such a horse as the Captain had Satan been, less gigantic of body but fully as great of soul. He would have known how to handle the big black, that father of hers. With his voice alone he had ruled Satan; with his voice alone he could have ruled the Captain. From him came her own authority over the black; and so the stallion was the bond which allied her to the ghost of Dan Barry.

All of this was in her mind, but when the afternoon shadows slanted sharply and the night wind began to move in cool and quiet from the desert, she went back to the place where she had tethered Peter, and mounted him for the return to the ranch.

The glory was gone from poor Peter. Never had he galloped more smoothly or fleetly. Never had his temper been so kind. Never had he borne his fine head so jauntily, canting it a little to the side as if to watch her and his road at the same time. And yet for all that, he had no interest for her, except a sort of sadness which began to ache in her heart, like that lonely sorrow that comes to a man who returns from the city to the village of his youth.

Peter had shrunk away to a tame shadow of a horse. The reality was the raging black plunging hither and thither in the Purvis corral and making foolish and ineffective shams of the men who strove to battle with him.

She was barely home in time to cook supper for Buck Daniels. He was unchanged since she had seen him last that morning. The silence which had descended on him since she had revealed what Lee Haines told her had continued unbroken. He was an older and a sadder man. Once or twice during the meal he tried to make conversation. He told of an old cow of crossed Durham and Hereford blood, a mighty mother of nine children, which had been

bogged down at a water hole, and how he had dragged her back to a safe footing, and how she had afterward followed him toward home for more than a mile, following after him as if she wished to express her gratitude. He told her of how a long section of barbed wire on the fence had fallen.

Each time Joan strove to answer him cheerfully and take up the burden of the talk. Yet in spite of herself the silences would come as her mind rambled far off to the scenes of the day. And sometimes she felt a smile starting on her lips as she remembered how she had faced the Captain, and how, at last, he had come to her hand.

She was trembling with eagerness. She was like a child who had received a toy beyond even the highest hopes at Christmas and can sleep only with the treasure in its arms. So Joan felt. She wondered if she could close her eyes that night. And when she went back the next day, would the Captain remember her?

"Might it be that you've been to town to-day?" Buck asked with some hesitation.

Remembering the fiercely dictatorial Buck Daniels of other days, tears started to her eyes. She jumped up from her place and ran around the table to him.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with her arms around his neck and her cheek beside his cheek. "Is there such a terrible distance as this between us? Don't you see that I love you more than ever? Is there an-

other man in all the world who would have done for the child of his friend what you have done for me? I never forget it. It follows me through the day. And if I don't do just as you want me to—"

"Hush, Joan!" he said, seeming more startled than pleased by the outbreak of affection. "Hush, honey! You don't have to do no explaining to me!"

He patted her hands in a perfunctory fashion, and she returned slowly to her place. Truly she had not dreamed that the gap was as great as this. And when she sat down again and dropped her chin on her hand, even though her eyes were lowered, she knew that he was staring half frightened at her while he stirred his sugar into his coffee.

What had come into her that had made Buck Daniels afraid? She considered it carefully, biting her lower lip.

"Ain't you going to eat?" she heard Buck saying softly at last.

Glancing up, she saw him rolling a cigarette with uncertain fingers, staring at her the while with an intolerable concern. And for a moment she almost wished that she had learned nothing of the truth, but that she could have gone on as before, looking upon honest Buck Daniels as her father. He began to take up the conversation at the point where it had been left off.

"I asked if you'd been to town?" he said.

She nodded.

"It was considerable of a fight they had with that black hoss, the Captain?" he suggested.

"He's a lion of a horse!" she said.

"He's a man-killer," observed Buck. "I hear they ain't even going to try to sell him."

"What in the world will they do with him, then? Give him away?"

"The sheriff don't see it that way," said Buck. "He's going to take no more chances of having gents busted up. He's going to put a chunk of lead into the Captain's head."

It struck Joan dumb. It was impossible for her to talk any more, and the supper was finished in a still more wretched silence. But when she was doing the dishes, a little later, a determination began to grow up in her mind.

The Captain, at all odds, must be saved. She could not beg him from Sim Hargess. She had seen that man, and his thin, hard features were still vivid in her mind. He would treat her request as a foolish child's desire. How could he possibly understand? And yet the Captain must be saved!

When she finished her work she opened the back door and went outside. Buck Daniels was pacing solemnly to and fro in the darkness, with a cloud of fragrance from his pipe following him. The sight of his solitary figure stirred her with pity. Those evenings were ended when she had read to him out of her books and when he had stopped her here and there to ask the meaning of the rarer

words. Those cheerful hours were ended, she knew.

And though she wanted to go out to him and take his arm for a while, she was held back by a feeling that he would be ill at ease. She did not wish to hear that new diffidence in his voice and guess at that startled look in his eyes.

As she climbed the stairs to her room she strove to explain it, and what she decided was that he was attaching to her all the awe which he must have once felt for her father. Now that she knew her blood, he was afraid and he could not help but show it.

In her room she threw herself on the bed without undressing and waited a long age until Buck came upstairs. He did not pause at her door this evening to say good night, but with a loud, stamping step went on to his own room. She listened to the creaking of the floor until he was in bed. Then she was up at once and down the stairs, all silently, not in dread lest Buck should hear her now, but in pity lest he should wake and worry for her until her return.

In the pasture she found and saddled honest Peter, and a few moments later they were bound for the town at a gallop. She cut around behind the houses, according to the plan which she had worked out before, tethered Peter at a little distance, and then, carrying a halter and lead rope, she started through the trees toward the hotel stable

and the corral behind it. Voices in the darkness stopped her.

"This is where Haines was hit," one of two men was saying. "This is where they picked up the blood trail. If him and this Harry Gloster had ever got together again with that gang of theirs up in the mountains, they'd of been hard to beat, eh?"

Joan slipped away to the side and passed in a circle around the pair. But she was deeply grateful for the thought which they had given to her. Harry Gloster had been one of the gang of Lee Haines. Of course that was self-evident, for otherwise why should Haines have risked his life and lost it to save Gloster?

That point having been settled, it was clear that Gloster himself must have spurred across country and driven on the camp of the outlaws, that same place, no doubt, toward which the Captain had been looking when he stared far off at the mountains. And if he were given his head, would he not fly to it as an eagle flies?

She hurried on until she reached the corral. There were many voices near it. Two or three men were busy in the stable behind the hotel. And in a back yard adjoining, two youngsters were talking in shrill voices.

The Captain himself, lighted by the stars, seemed more formidable than ever. His black body was half swallowed among the shadows. Only a ghostly

high light was struck out here and there, so that all his pride and his beauty were rather to be guessed at than seen.

She called to him in a whisper. There was a snort of fear and anger from the great horse, and some one thundered from the barn:

"Darn you, Jimmy, if you bother that Captain hoss again I'll come out there and wring your confounded little neck!"

There was no answer from "Jimmy." She waited again for a moment and then spoke not in a whisper, but in a low pitched voice. There was an instant effect on the stallion. He had crowded away to the farther corner of the corral. Now he came forward in that stealthy way of his until he was in the middle of the inclosure.

He had not forgotten! He even stretched out his nose as if to find her hand, and he did not stir when she slipped the halter over his head!

But that was not all. When she opened the gate he came meekly forth at the first twitch of the lead rope, and when she started on he followed obediently. Peter himself was not more docile, except that he always walked behind, and this great fellow strode up beside her and forged a little ahead. And again there was that strange feeling that he was a companion rather than a servant, that he was obeying her mind rather than her signals.

She brought him into the open behind the village,

and there she took off the halter. It was the hardest thing she had ever done in her life. How simple it would have been to take him back to the ranch!

But that would have meant the coming of stern Sim Hargess to claim the property of the county, and the coming of Sim Hargess meant a bullet through the head of the black horse. And if she could not have him, better—far better that the mountains should claim him once more.

So she unbuckled the halter and let it drop. She waved it above her head, and the Captain, with a snort of alarm, vanished as if on wings into the night. She stared after him for a while with a heavy heart and then looked up to the northern and west horizon where the mountains blocked away the stars in shadowy pyramids and low running lines. Yonder was his goal, and how soon he would be among them, bathed in freedom!

After that, she went back to Peter. She had been hoping, a little before, that she might be able to follow the drifting form of the black horse through the night, but a moment of reflection told her how impossible this would be. It would be easier to follow a dead star through the sky. And she must surrender the vague belief that the Captain would lead her back to the mountains and to Harry Gloster himself.

She mounted Peter, therefore, and started sadly away toward the ranch. Three mighty influences had poured into her life one after another. Of

these, Lee Haines was dead and Gloster and the Captain were gone forever. What remained to her was the dreadful monotony of the ranch life and the long, sad silences of Buck Daniels.

Peter, swinging on at his smooth canter, started sharply to the side and doubled his pace. Out of a hole straight before them swept a shadow. And, although she could not make it out, the sudden fear of Peter caught hold on Joan. She sent him on at a racing gait, and leaning close to his neck, jockeyed him ahead.

Now hoofbeats sounded behind her and began to thunder past. She looked over in astonishment. It was not possible that any horse could pass Peter so easily.

And then she saw a great black horse sweeping away into the night before her without a rider on his back. It was the Captain!

CHAPTER XXII

THE GYPSY TRAIL

IF some of her fear left her, her wonder increased many fold. She shot Peter straight on, and the good horse worked at top speed with his ears flagging back, so great was his effort.

Yet, blinking through the wind which that gallop raised, she saw the Captain swing back again into view, coming past on her right; then, a moment later, he walked up on her left—and she understood. He was using that matchless speed of his literally to run circles around Peter.

She drew up the gelding and waited. It was only a pause of a few seconds. Then the Captain came flying out of the night with his mane combed back and his tail drawn straight out by the arrowy speed of his coming.

He shot at poor Peter with gaping mouth and eyes which, it seemed to Joan, were devilishly bright. Peter whirled away, and the great stallion went by, missing them narrowly. Joan dropped to the ground as Peter, mastered by terror, darted away with a flying pair of bridle reins. He was not pursued.

The Captain, after catapulting past, swept around in a short circle, sent after the flying Peter a triumphant neigh, and then brought up before Joan. He had an advantage of ground which added to his lofty stature so that he blocked away the stars, and like stars were his great eyes, half shadowed under a brush of forelock.

Joan, looking up at the giant animal, laughed joyously. It was more beautiful than a dream to her. He had followed her through the night as a dog might have followed, and now he let her take him by the mane and lead him after panicky Peter.

For yonder stood Peter on a swale of sand, neighing his dread which drew him one way and his love of his mistress which urged him in the opposite direction. So she halted the Captain, then ran on to Peter.

When she had the reins of the gelding again, looking back with speechless anxiety, she saw that the Captain had not left the spot where she had stationed him. He was watching her with a high head, and Joan knew now that she could never abandon him.

With fingers trembling with her haste, she tore the saddle from Peter and then his bridle. Then, with a wave of the hand, she sent him on his way. He, at least, would not misunderstand that signal. He would never stop running until he was outside the gate to his corral at home and there he would wait until Buck Daniels came out in the morning.

Dragging the trappings with her, she went back to the Captain. Under his head she dropped them in a pile and let him investigate. He was not at all pleased, it was plain to see.

First he sniffed at the saddle and bridle, rank with the sweat of Peter. He even pawed at them disdainfully, tumbling them over and over in the sand. Then he went to Joan and, swinging around behind her, he looked down over her shoulder at the gear she had brought.

What would happen when she attempted to put that saddle on his back? She was agreeably surprised. He did not stir when she lifted it high to swing it up to his withers.

And although he swung his head around to watch the proceedings, he did not object when she drew up the cinches. They had to be lengthened, of course, for having been set for the deerlike body of Peter, they could not encompass the ample girth of the Captain.

It was done, at last, and the head strap of the bridle having been lengthened, it was fitted to the head of the stallion. And so, finally, her foot was in the stirrup and she drew herself up to her place.

It was the crucial test. She had heard of many a horse which a child could mount barebacked, but which turned into a fury when a saddle was used. But the Captain made not the slightest trouble about it. He only twisted his head around until he had sniffed at her foot in the stirrup. Then, as

she loosed the reins, he straightened away at a flying gallop.

Peter was no common horse, but how different was this from the stride of Peter. Between the beat of the Captain's hoofs, he seemed to float away on wings, a long and rolling gait which made her think of the lift and the swing of waves in the deep ocean. And yet it was all as effortless as the motion of the waves.

She could only tell the speed at which she was traveling by the rate at which the ground shot past beneath her and the fanning of the wind in her face. As for the jerk of laboring muscles, there was none of that.

She made no attempt to guide him. But when they came to a stretch where the footing was firm, she sent him away at full speed with a cry.

Full speed? She had not dreamed what speed could be. As his stride lengthened he appeared to flatten toward the earth. The long roll came out of his gallop. It was like the dart of water down a long, smooth flume of rock. And it increased steadily to such a point that she began to gasp for breath and then drew back on the reins.

Instantly he returned to his former pace, rocking along as before without effort, and with no wheezing or laboring for breath in spite of all his work. But here was enough of play and it was high time for her to go home. She swung him about and headed him for the ranch.

There was an instant change in the manner of the stallion. He fell at once to a jerky, high headed trot, and when she strove to urge him ahead faster, he shook his head in a very human denial and cut down his gait still further. Presently he was walking. She struck him with the flat of her hand on the flank, but at that he came to a halt, and twisting halfway around, he turned his head toward those western mountains which were his goal.

Here was a new feature. To be sure, he was docile as a lamb at times, but that was only when she chose a way which was his way also. She struck him again with the flat of her hand on the silk of his flank. This time he shuddered under the blow and his ears flattened. He was angry now. Another moment, for all she could tell, and he would be pitching as she had seen him pitch in the Purvis corral.

So, with her heart hammering in her throat, she began to consider what she could do. She must leave him where he was if she hoped to get back to the ranch before the morning, and if she did not arrive there, poor Buck Daniels would go half mad with anxiety.

A tinkling dissonance began to fall toward her from the sky. She raised her head and looked up. There was nothing to be seen, but now the crying grew stronger and stronger as some unseen wedge of wild geese flowed north through the upper darkness.

The thought of Buck Daniels grew dim in her mind. Still watching the stars above her, she became aware that the stallion was in motion again, that he was turning, that he was heading north again at a trot and then at a canter and then at the mile devouring gallop. But she had no power to resist.

Every moment her happiness was increasing, and she had a feeling that she had been cut away, at last, from restraints which she hated and that she was being launched on the road which was truly her road because her father had traveled it before her. Where it would lead her she could not guess; and because she could not guess it was a double delight.

Conscience was not a small power in her, but when once one has turned one's back on conscience the chase is long before it overtakes one. So it was with Joan. Although she knew that duty led her back toward Buck Daniels there was something far stronger than duty which carried her toward the mountains.

Hour after hour the desert flowed beneath them. They began to wind among low foothills. At last a dim scent of pines began to blow toward her from the upper reaches of the slopes and, as the dawn began to grow gray, they came to a pleasant spot. Here a stream trickled around the shoulder of a hill, dropped away in a musical cascade, and formed beneath in a deep pool, still black with

night, although the upper peaks were beginning to grow out into the day.

Around the little lake there was a small meadow rich with grass, and the meadow was bordered in turn with shrubs and little stunted evergreens. Here she stopped.

The Captain had no objection. When the saddle was removed he went down to the water and drank before she could prevent him. But he took only a few swallows and turned away to the grass. Peter, she knew, if he had been as hot, would have buried his head to the eyes and drunk enough to make himself sick, but the Captain needed no human wisdom to teach him how best to care for himself.

In the meantime she must prepare for her own breakfast, and it was a simple matter. Buck Daniels himself had taught her to carry fishing tackle always with her when she rode out, as well as a meager roll of a blanket wrapped in the slicker behind her saddle.

So she rigged a hook and line on a straight stick which she cut, and sat down on a stone by the pool to try her luck. She had a bite almost at once, and then another.

And in her excitement she quite forgot that she was fishing for food and not for sport until a shadow fell across the water before her, and she looked up to find that the Captain had left his grass and come over to watch the game.

CHAPTER XXIII

"YOU AIN'T NO KILLER!"

THREE times the pursuers came again upon the trail of Harry Gloster. And then they lost it, but not until the sheriffs of four counties, with their posses, had taken their fling at him, singly and united.

For one thing, it would have been a feather in any man's cap to have taken him. His record included a double killing; the suggestion, which was believed far and wide, that he was a member of the old Haines gang, and a jail break at the expense of so famous a custodian of the law as Sim Hargess. But fame was not all that would be gained by his capture.

His career had caught the public eye. He had been near to destruction so many times that men began to feel that he enjoyed a charmed life. And, all in the space of a comparatively few hours, the reward which was offered for his apprehension dead or alive grew by leaps and by bounds.

Any rancher who numbered his cattle by the thousand could afford to bring his name to atten-

tion by adding a few hundreds to the reward. It passed ten thousand dollars. The entire section of desert and mountains went wild with the man-hunt fever.

A slug of lead which cost a few cents would make some lucky man the possessor of a small fortune, to say nothing of a reputation which might easily lead him into office as sheriff of some unquiet county. Crack shots mounted upon their best horses literally swarmed out by the score. There was no trail too obscure for their notice. They combed the nooks and crannies.

And yet Gloster shook them off. He managed it by a clever move, although he did not at all consider it as a wise measure when he took it. He had to see Joan again, no matter at what a risk, and so he doubled straight back into the region of his jail break!

He felt that it was like putting his head into the lion's mouth. And every one else seemed to feel that such a march would be the same thing. They hunted with increasing fury, but they hunted in a growing circle, the activity being on the rim while the center of the circle was the town of Sim Hargess and the jail break. That center was quiet, and near it, toward the ranch of Buck Daniels, came the outlaw.

The town itself was humming this morning with a new excitement of which Gloster could know nothing. For, at dawn, it was found that the big

black stallion had been turned out of his corral—the gate had been deliberately unbarred, and it was the opinion of all that some member of the Haines gang had come down to claim the great horse.

That so much should have been ventured was considered a double insult—to Sim Hargess and to the prowess of every gun-bearing man in the whole town. There were angry little conclaves at the hotel and the general merchandise store. There was gritting of teeth and a looking to weapons.

None of this was known to Gloster himself, for he came shortly after the dawn in sight of the little ranch-house, installed his horse near the cotton-woods, and stalked the house itself. He had hardly taken covert in a shed when Buck Daniels appeared, and uttered a shout of surprise at the sight of a trim built gelding standing near the gate of the corral and touching noses with the horses within.

After that the rancher acted like a man possessed with fear. In another moment he had thrown a saddle and bridle on a horse and was riding north and east, leaning far from the saddle and studying a trail. He dipped into a swale, and as soon as he had disappeared Gloster came from his hiding and ran to examine the marks in the sand.

It was at once apparent that Daniels was following the back trail of a horse, and it was not hard to put two and two together. Yonder was the gelding with the saddle mark still showing on his back; and Daniels had left with such haste that he

had not even turned the beautiful animal into the corral.

And Gloster remembered the outline of the horse which he had seen Joan riding the night of the jail break. He could not recognize it, of course, having only seen it by starlight, but there was enough similarity to make him feel reasonably sure. Joan's horse had come back to the ranch without saddle or bridle, and now the rancher was following the back trail to find what had become of his girl.

So Gloster returned to the cottonwoods and took up the pursuit. It was not easy work. All day he lay in the rear trying to keep Daniels in sight without being seen himself, and although in the beginning there was some shelter behind which he could ride from point to point, yet it was always difficult to remain unseen.

In two hours of the slow journey, he saw Daniels change his direction to north and west, and start riding with increased vigor. He himself soon came to the spot; although he was not an expert trailsmen, yet it was easy enough to read the sign here. Yonder the marks of the gelding's hoofs crossed the sign of a much larger horse, as was shown by the size of the prints and the depths to which they had sunk. Here, too, was a place where the sand was raked, as if the saddle had been brushed across it.

What had happened, Gloster could not dream, unless at this point Joan had caught a fresh horse

which might have been wandering loose. Yet what horse could it have been for which she would give up the fine gelding he had seen at the ranch?

He went on, pondering these things, and finding his trailing problem more and more difficult. Daniels was showing the way. But now they were climbing into the foothills, giving the rancher a chance to look back and down and discover his pursuer. However, the roughness of the country was an aid to Gloster, and by keeping a sharp lookout before him, he felt reasonably secure. The afternoon wore on. The sun was westering rapidly when the blow came.

He had rounded a little pyramid of jumbled rocks as large as a cabin when a dry, unhurried voice said behind him: "This is my turn to say 'tag,' Gloster. Just shove up your hands, will you?"

And over his shoulder he saw the deep-lined, solemn face of Buck Daniels appearing over a boulder with a rifle leveled steadily upon him. He hesitated. To be taken prisoner meant death just as surely as it meant death if he trifled with the steady hands which had now drawn a bead upon him. And yet, if he surrendered now, there might be a possibility of taking Daniels unawares later on.

"Well, Daniels," he said, turning his horse with a twist of his knees so that he could face his captor, and pushing his big hands above his head, "it looks like you're about ten thousand dollars richer right now than you were five minutes ago."

The rancher arose to full view and stepped from behind the rocks. His horse followed him out.

He dropped his rifle now into the crook of his arm. Now, thought Gloster, was the time to whip out a gun and try a snapshot. But he was held back by the consideration that it would be poor work to dodge hanging on account of a double killing of which he was innocent, by murdering another man. Besides, the calmness of Daniels bespoke an infinite sureness in himself.

"Ten thousand?" said Daniels. "Man, they ain't put that price on *you*, have they?"

"I saw a handbill that was posted up on a fence post this morning," said Gloster. "Ten thousand it is. It may be raised to fifteen thousand by the time you get to town."

"Ten thousand!" echoed Daniels in more disgust than triumph, so far as Gloster could see. "Ten thousand for a gent that done nothing but murder a couple of harmless old sourdoughs that couldn't get a gun out of leather under five minutes of work. Ten thousand for that? What's the country coming to?"

"It is getting sort of low," Gloster nodded.

"In my day," went on Daniels, "they didn't put that much on the head of a man that would of turned and shot the rifle out of my hands before I could of pulled the trigger on him!"

"Was there ever a man as fast and sure as that?"

"There was, son. There was. Just slip off that

hoss, and without letting your hands come down. Thanks!”

The last word was as he drew the revolver from Gloster’s holster, patted him for other weapons, and stepped back.

“You can put your hands down. I suppose that the gent that brings you in will be made a hero out of.”

“Sure, you’ll be famous by night, Daniels.”

“Bah!” snorted the other in the most profound disgust. “A yaller livered skunk like you can’t make nobody famous; ain’t worth nothing but to feed to the buzzards!”

“I kind of wish,” said Gloster slowly, “that I’d taken a chance on that gun of yours.”

“A murdering hound like you don’t take no chances at all,” said Daniels. “He wants a sure thing like the killing of two old, stiff handed miners. But the next thing I want to know is why you been trailing me all day?”

“All day?” echoed Gloster.

“Sure. I seen you coming this morning. But I didn’t figure that you’d stay after me all through the trail. Now, what’s in your head?”

“The same thing, take it by and large, that’s in your head.”

“What d’ye mean by that? And, mind you, Gloster, I want to hear you talk short and sweet. I’d mind sinking a chunk of lead into you no more’n I’d mind sinking it into a fence post. You

ain't a man. You got the heart of a dog wrapped up in a man's skin!"

There was no doubt that he meant what he said. Honest and fierce scorn glared out of his eyes at Gloster.

"What I mean," explained the big man, "is that I'm looking for what you're looking for—Joan."

The rancher started violently. And it appeared that he was about to execute the threat of a moment before, for his hand clutched the stock of his rifle hard and the forefinger curled around the trigger. His jaw set and his face blackened with his emotion.

"I know how she tried to bail you out," he said at last. "I know that you'd been sneaking around seeing her by night. But how come you to be trailing her now instead of running hell-bent north or south to save your rotten hide?"

"Look here," said Gloster, "did it ever pop into your head that maybe I *didn't* kill my two old partners up there at the mine, but that I come home from hunting and found 'em lying there dead, and then cut and run for it because I knew that the blame would be sure to fall on me?"

"What?" growled Daniels. "D'you figure me for a downright fool, Gloster?"

"If I'd been out to kill, would I have wasted time working with my fists to get out of the mess Haines and I tumbled into when we broke out of the jail?"

Buck Daniels started to answer, changed his mind, and finally said:

"Put down your hands. I got to think things over. It ain't nothing that you've said that makes me want time for considering. It's just—what would I do with you if I took you along?"

"Maybe that reward sort of bothers you—wouldn't know what to do with it?" Gloster grinned.

But there was no mirth in the eyes of Daniels. He was staring at Harry Gloster with a sort of wistful wonder.

"Gloster," he said at last, "there ain't nobody in the world that I got so much cause for hating, but somehow when I'm here looking at you, I can't keep on hating. I suppose that you're crooked as a snake—but you *look* straight."

"The only crooked things I've ever done was swiping the horses that I had to have to save my hide once I started running," said his captive. "That was where I was a fool—in running like that!"

"Maybe you were right, though. It would of looked black against you."

"No. If I'd stood my ground everybody would of remembered that I couldn't shoot straight enough with a revolver to scare a jackrabbit twenty yards away."

For a long moment Daniels bit his lip and studied his captive, staring steadily at his feet and then flashing quick glances up to his face. Suddenly he tossed across the revolver which he had taken from the big man.

"There's your gun," he said.

And then he watched, catlike, and saw Gloster deliberately shoving the revolver down into the holster. A man who knows horses will judge another's ability to ride by the very way he swings into the saddle. A man who knows how to handle a revolver for a quick draw can tell one of his peers by the way he handles the weapon even in the most insignificant motions. For a heavy weapon runs lightly over the very finger tips of the expert. Buck Daniels had been an expert in his day. He watched closely the manner in which that gun was restored to the holster. Then he stepped forward with arm outstretched.

"Gloster," he said, "you're straight. You ain't no killer. And I'm mighty sorry for the cussing I give you a while back."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FORCES OF EVIL

It had been a stiff climb upward, and Joe Macarthur halted his horse at the mouth of the crevice which cut the mountainside. It was a long raw gash which divided the mountain to its top, some four hundred or five hundred feet above, and apparently water could not have cut the gorge, for the sides were a mass of squared bowlders and great rising steps almost as inaccessible as the face of a cliff.

It appeared that here the rock fold had yawned asunder and had remained in this fashion unchanged since the day of its making. Half a dozen mountain sheep were feeding in the scant pasture at the bottom of the cañon. When Macarthur appeared the wild things apparently showed that there was no interior exit to the gorge, for, instead of running in, they began to mount the cliff face itself with great dexterity. They attacked it with a rush and sprang up its perpendicular front as if the rocks were iron and their feet strong magnets. Neither did their strength give out, but they went up the five hundred foot ascent as though they were being jerked along by great cables strung from above.

Macarthur had reached for his revolver, but before he could fire they were already up so high and pursuing such a dodging course that it was almost impossible to hit a target. So he merely watched the four legged acrobats out of sight and then turned to continue his way.

He found, however, that a man had appeared as if by magic from among the rocks and now, leaning upon a long rifle, was rolling a cigarette. Apparently he was quite unaware of Macarthur's presence.

He was a singular figure. He wore a silk shirt whose hue was a violent blue, with lower sleeves which had been scuffed away to rags. His hands were covered with gauntlet gloves which, however, did not impede the rolling of the cigarette, for the good reason that the tips of the fingers were completely missing.

He did not wear overalls, but a pair of what had once been very good whipcord riding breeches. These, however, had been worn out and and rent in many places, and every hole was covered with a patch of overall material sewed on in great stitches with twine for thread.

His boots were those of a man who spends most of his time on horseback. They fitted the foot with shop-made care and rose halfway up the calf of his leg. A crimson silk bandanna of immense size and a Mexican sombrero richly ornamented with silver medallions completed his attire.

He was a very fat little man. He did not stand

more than two or three inches over five feet and yet his weight could not have been much short of two hundred pounds. That weight was not concentrated in a great paunch, but it was spread over all his body in an equal layer of fat. It bulged over the tops of his boots; it wrinkled on his neck; it stuffed out his shirt so that his upper arm was as large as a man's thigh.

He had pushed his sombrero onto the back of his head, bringing out from shadow a pug nosed, round cheeked, good-humored face which was powerfully reminiscent of a prize Poland China pig. To show his nonchalance, or else to call attention to the silver quality of his whistle, he was trilling out a sentimental ballad with all the quavers and sharp runs of a professional musician.

"By God!" cried Macarthur. "It's good old Fatty himself!"

The other removed his hat and bowed so that a wrinkle formed heavily across his waist.

"How are things, Joe?" he asked. "I ain't seen you this long time."

"Who's the leader now that Haines is bumped off?" asked Macarthur.

"I dunno what you mean," said Fatty.

"Come clean, Fatty. Tell me the straight of it. I'm back here to join the gang."

"What gang?"

"All right," said Macarthur. "I can't *make* you talk."

"What made you think that there was any gang up here?"

"I knew that you'd left the old hangout. And once when I was ducking for cover, about five years back, I run onto the hollow inside the mountain, here. Thinking things over, and the queer way that the Haines boys have been melting into the rocks up here, I figured that this must be the new hangout. Am I right?"

"Hangout for what?" asked Fatty innocently.

"I'll ride through the passage and take a look for myself, then."

He urged his mustang forward, but he was stopped by a sharp word from the fat man, who had pitched his rifle across the crook of his arm and laid his finger on the trigger.

"Everything slow and easy, Joe," he said.

"Sure, Fatty. I don't want to do no rushing. But I claim that my place is back with the gang. It was Haines that threw me out, not the rest of you; and I've got a plant laid, Fatty, that'll give us all enough to retire on. The Wickson Bank, Fatty!"

The little round eyes of Fatty shone as greed took hold upon him. The Wickson Valley rolled before his eyes, beautiful little Wickson Valley, green and filled with growing things from the network of irrigating canals which trenched its flat bottom lands.

The Wickson Bank! Of course, they had thought of that before, but the thought of a retreat through

so thickly populated a region was not encouraging. They might blow the safe to smithereens, but as for a get-away, with hundreds of angry farmers taking rifles and blocking the way to the mountains—that put a very sad face to the affair. However, if Joe Macarthur had really been able to arrange a “plant,” that was quite another matter.

“It’ll be the last job you’ll ever have to do, Fatty,” Macarthur continued coolly. He had touched Fatty at another sensitive point. For as flesh grew upon him, a pound a month, Fatty had realized long since that he must not hope to continue a roving life forever. And he had a favorite dream tucked away into a corner of his heart of buying a small ranch somewhere—somewhere farther north than the noise of his fame had ever spread, say, and there settling down to peace and plenty.

Ah, how his tender flesh ached at the thought of soft feather beds and a wide armed easy chair! His dream was still misty in his eyes as he looked up into the face of Macarthur again.

“Come on in, Joe. All you got to do is to make the boys feel pretty sure that you mean what you say, and that you ain’t trying to double cross ’em for a reward.”

“Double cross? Listen, Fatty, what sort of a life do I figure to fit into except one with a gang of boys like you and the rest?”

And Fatty, looking up, could not but agree.

The gorge narrowed as they went, but now opened

into a strange hollow chopped out of the head of the mountain. It was a basin of some seven or eight acres surrounded by five hundred feet cliffs to the east and other walls sloping down until, to the west, the barrier was hardly ten paces high. There were clusters of pines here and there, a little stream running from a spring to a pool against the western cliff without visible outlet, and several acres of rich pasture.

What Macarthur saw last in the hollow was a cabin among the trees, built at random of squared logs and unsquared, of piled rocks and of rocks laid in courses. It was a mysterious hodgepodge such as might have been thrown together by a madman with a giant's strength. For in spite of its singular mixture of building materials, it appeared strong and lasting, and although every wind that stooped into the hollow was sure to send a hundred drafts through a hundred chinks in the crazy walls, yet the strongest of winds could not knock it over like the house of cards it appeared.

The interior was as strange as the exterior. It had been used always as a temporary residence, and yet it had been used very often and sometimes for extended periods so that the upper timbers and wall surfaces of the big room—for one large chamber occupied the majority of the floor space—were blackened with many coatings of soot which had drifted up to them from the fire which smoked in the exact center of the room.

There was no chimney except an irregular hole which had been broken through the roof as if at the last moment those who had built the house remembered that it must have a fire in it, and had made this preparation. There was no stove, no oven. Instead, a circle of fire blackened stones of many sizes surrounded the smoking coals. Some of these stones, heated by the fire, had been touched by a fall of cold water and had split apart; the white belly of one showed like a streak of paint among the sooty rocks.

As for furniture, there was little in the house save the saddles and bridles which hung from pegs along the wall or had been thrown aside carelessly in the corner. There was, however, what seemed to be the bottom of a wrecked buckboard—though it was strange indeed that the most durable buckboard in the world could ever have been driven to this point in the wilderness. This fragment now served as the top to a table, the legs of which were four great rocks, each a burden for two men to lift.

Around this table, on other stones, sat four solemn men. Their faces and characters were so unusual that one might have skimmed all the villainy in the wild West without finding a more dangerous quartet, and justice should be done to each in turn.

Foremost in avoirdupois was Babe Cooney, a swarthy skinned man so smoothly shaven, always, that in some lights his face seemed to have the texture and luster of youth. He was not more than

thirty, perhaps, at the most, but the double battering of years and a hard life had reduced him. The lines around his mouth and eyes would have done credit to his elder by twenty years. And there was a cynical lifelessness in his eyes such as usually does not come until later middle age, at the earliest—not a scorn of the world and the people he found in it, so much as profound weariness with what he had met.

He was a bulky fellow and it could be seen that he had put his strength, at one period of his life, to an effective use. His nose was hammered out of shape and appeared to be spongy, as if there were no bone in it, his grin was made horrible by the absence of several of his front teeth, and his right ear was that mass of fleshy convolutions which has adorned so many of the heroes of the ring and which is called a "cauliflower."

There were other signs, also, that he had been of the profession of the squared circle. His body was a great wedge of which the spreading shoulders were the base and the feet the apex. He tapered sharply to the hips and still more sharply from the hips to the feet, so that the lower part of his legs were comparatively as meager as the legs of a goat. And yet above the waist he was a giant.

However long it had been since he stood on the canvas and scuffed the rosin under the soles of his fighting shoes, he still had a certain dexterity of hand which showed in his gestures. And he had a

way of looking people searchingly squarely in the eye which is learned by pugilists; for the good warrior with the gloves looks into the eyes of his foe and sees all the rest by intuition and from the corners of his eyes.

Such was Babe Cooney. If he had been carved in two, each half would have been as large as his left-hand neighbor at the table. This was "Sliver" Martin. The Sliver was so named because the word was most appropriate. All of his body was shrunken skin and bone. When he lowered his eyes, his face was the face of a cadaver. There was purple of cold under his cheek bones. His eyelids were puffy and red, and all the flesh around his mouth was sunken. To make his leanness more ominous, his hands and feet were of huge size. Even the bulky fist of Babe Cooney would have been lost inside the claws of the Sliver.

To the left of Sliver appeared Lew Cambridge. Lew made a strange appearance with an abnormally small head and a large body. The face had one large feature, which was the enormous nose, overshadowing all else, the childish mouth, the dwarfed and slanted forehead. In the expanse of those wide shoulders the head seemed like that of an infant.

The huge body of Lew Cambridge was his chief interest in life. He was a self-conscious athlete. His setting-up exercises were gone through religiously night and morning. He studied the growth of his biceps as another studies the growth of his millions.

He was one of those omnipotent men who can do anything. He could pitch horse-shoes, walk on his hands, chin himself with one hand, run, climb, fight, wrestle, throw a knife, do gun tricks—in fact, anything which asked for steady nerves or strong muscles or both he felt to be in his special province. Now and then he arose from the chair and walked about the room, stretching himself to keep deadly cramps and chills out of his muscles.

The fourth and last member of the group was quite different from the other three. Although each of these was remarkable enough, and each was formidable in mind and appearance, one felt that Dud Rainey was most distinctly out of place. He was such a man, in appearance, as one finds about a university, seated in study rooms, delving into post-graduate courses, heaping up degrees for no purpose and constantly gathering materials for constantly unwritten books.

He had a towering and nobly formed forehead, beneath which his bloodshot eyes blinked behind strong glasses. His cheeks were thin and pale to match the deep furrows of thought that creased his forehead. The weight of his head was poorly supported by a scrawny neck and a hollow chest. When he spoke his voice was low and monotonous and his diction pure.

This was the group which had gathered about the table. They were playing poker. And ragged as were their clothes and poor as was the room in

which they sat, their stakes consisted of stacks of gold pieces, fives and tens and broad faced twenties. The ante was five dollars. The bets on the smallest hands were apt to run into a few hundreds. Moreover, they one and all handled the yellow coin as if it were so much dirt.

They were betting now before the draw, Lew Cambridge forcing up the draw on the strength of three jacks, and Babe Cooney still more confident because of a straight, and when the stack of gold in the center of the table had grown high, and when the other two had been forced out of the hand, Cooney suddenly stood up, agape, and pointed through the door. The beautiful straight fluttered from his hand and strewed the floor. The others crowded about him.

"It's Joe Macarthur come back to us—now hell will be popping again!" cried Dud Rainey.

CHAPTER XXV

THE DOVE IN THE HAWK'S EYRIE

WHAT the black, sharp eyes of Macarthur saw first, as he passed through the door of the cabin, was the yellow gleam of the gold which was scattered upon the table. But he did not give it a second glance.

One wild evening at cards had stripped him of the gold he stole from Springer and Nicholas and Gloster. His purse was as flat as a punctured balloon, and that gold spoke to him with a welcome voice. However, he centered his attention upon the men immediately before him, and he saw at once that all was not going to pass off smoothly. They shook hands with him, but there was an obvious restraint.

"He's come up with a 'plant' on the Wickson Bank!" Fatty called out cheerfully, entering behind Macarthur. "I guess we're glad to see him, boys?"

"The Wickson Bank!" shouted Lew Cambridge, and smote Cooney heavily upon the shoulder.

But the other three showed no enthusiasm. Indeed, a little silence fell upon the group.

"It's all worked out," said Macarthur. "I got an inside man on the job. He's cheap and safe. And that's what we want. All I need is some men that can be depended on. Of course, I could of picked 'em up anywhere. But I looked back to the old days with the gang. And I figured it was worth while to give you all a split to show that my heart was in the right place."

The gloom of three of the men had spread to the other two. Fatty and Lew were waiting to see in what direction the wind would blow. It was Dud Rainey who spoke, first arranging his glasses so that he could fix his mild eyes more directly upon Macarthur.

"Joe," he said, "the upshot of this is that you want to be back with us?"

"Of course. What threw me out before was that I had trouble with Haines. Him and me never did get on. You all know that. He always hated me. Hated me from the first minute he laid eyes on me."

"He had reasons," answered Rainey.

Big Macarthur flushed.

"Reasons?" he echoed gloomily.

"What did he say when he told you that you had to leave?"

"Are you going to remember that against me, Dud?"

"Haines was a square man," said Dud. "He had a heart as big as a mountain. I remember what he said in front of all of us. He said that you'd

made trouble from the first day you came in with us. He said you were a killer, Macarthur. And he named the men you'd killed. I agreed with Haines then and I agree with him still. I don't think you're the right sort of man to have in with us, Joe."

The anger of Macarthur turned his face purple. But he bit his lip and then managed to smile at a great cost of effort.

"In the old days Haines and you may have been right," he said. "But things have changed since then. In the old days, if a gent had said to me what you've just said now, I'd of had my gun out and working. But I'm changed, Dud. Have you heard of any killings being chalked up against my account lately?"

"You were always a smooth, quiet worker," answered Rainey.

But the others seemed to have been much impressed by the speech of Macarthur. Indeed, when Dud had at first denounced the gunfighter, the others had stepped back a little as if to get from the path of bullets which they expected to fly. When they heard Macarthur answering with words instead of his revolver, they were plainly astonished.

"Don't do your thinking too quick, Dud," remarked Lew Cambridge. "Anybody can change, can't he?"

And he wagged his little head wisely upon his immense shoulders.

"But they don't when they developed along cer-

tain lines," replied Dud, blinking behind his glasses. "You can make a pet out of a mountain lion. But let him taste a man's blood and no amount of petting will ever make him tame again; the devil is inside him to stay.

"And when a man finds out that there's fun in taking a chance with his own life in order to gamble at the life of another man, he never changes. If he likes excitement, there's no excitement to equal it.

"Why, the rest of you ought to know it! There's not one of us that hasn't had to use his gun now and then. But we use it because we have to, not because it's a game with us. Macarthur is different. If he smells a fight ten miles away, he rides for it."

"Son," said Sliver Martin, "them words sound pretty wise. But I dunno that I understand just what they mean. What's plain to me is that there's a difference here. Some of the boys want Joe back. Some don't. We'll throw a coin to decide. Is that square?"

They agreed that it was eminently just. And Sliver, producing a broad silver dollar from his pocket, spun it in the air as high as the roof. There it hung an instant at the top of its rise, a glittering point of light, then swooped. It did not strike the floor at once, however. With the oily ease of long practice, Macarthur slipped his weapon from its holster and fired. The dollar disappeared, clanged against the farther wall, and dropped heavily. One side of it was torn away.

There was a general uproar, not of anger, but of admiration. Then followed a scramble to get the coin, which Babe Cooney, by dint of tearing the others away, managed to capture as a souvenir.

"By God, Joe!" cried Fatty Guinness, "you have been practicing!"

"Boys," said Macarthur, keeping back a smile of pride with an effort, "this here thing means too much to me. I can't leave it to chance. I ask you again: will you take me in?"

There was no doubt now. The eye of every man had kindled, and still, with a courtesy far more profound than many a circle of clubmen could have shown, they held back and suspended their own opinions until they had heard the final voice of their companion, Rainey.

Perhaps Dud had been swept off his feet, like the others, by this timely exhibition of skill, or perhaps he had noted the change in the faces of his friends. At any rate, he now stepped to Macarthur and offered his hand. It was accepted at once.

"Joe," said Rainey, "you know that I always say what I think. I said it in the first place. I suppose the rest of the boys will think that if you come back into the gang I'd better get out if I care to keep a whole skin. But they're wrong. I've taken the privilege of changing my mind. We need men with an eye and a hand as fast as yours. Besides, you learned when Haines was with us, poor devil, that you couldn't bully the gang, and I don't think

that you'll ever try it again. I'm with you, for one!"

After that, there was not a dissentient voice, and when the clamor ended, Rainey spoke again.

"But there's only one way, partners," he said, "that Macarthur can fit in with the scheme of things. He can't play number two. Haines was a cleverer and bigger man than any I've ever met. Joe couldn't even play second to him. If Joe is back with us, I say that he's got to be first. He gets what Haines got: two shares in every deal we push through. He gets what Haines got: our obedience whenever he gives an order. How does that sound to you?"

It caused an argument, but only a brief one. There was no one who did not have to admit that they stood on a precarious basis so long as every man voted on every course of action. They could not be successful without a head to direct them. And, no matter what faults could be found with Macarthur in other respects, they were all agreed that he had the brains for such a position.

In ten minutes, from being a candidate with dubious probability of being elected, the big fellow was installed as chief, had received the grip of every one of the other five, and had their solemn promise to follow his orders as if he were a general and they privates in an army. The rule of Lee Haines had been as absolute as that of a captain on a ship at sea; it was agreed that Macarthur should have the same powers.

He lost no time in taking up his duties. At the

table where the poker game had been interrupted by his arrival, he sat down and planned for them the robbery of the Wickson Bank. With little piles of gold pieces he checked off the positions of the houses along the main street. With a greater pile he indicated the bank itself.

Then he told them what he had done. It was the old story. He had known of the cashier's need for money. He had approached the man diplomatically, and in a single interview he had gained what he wanted—the combination of the safe, the promise that the watchman should be discharged on the day of the robbery, and that a new one should not be hired in his place, and in return for this delivery of his honor, Samuel Carney had received in exchange a promise that he should have fifteen per cent of the profits, and those profits promised to be large. A full hundred thousand dollars in cash should be gained from the safe of the bank.

Such figures made the gang sit up. They glanced at one another with bright eyes and then openly complimented their new commander. He proceeded with the details. There was a stretch of thirty miles between them and the town of Wickson, but the trail was entirely, or almost entirely downhill. They could cover that distance easily in four or four and a half hours.

Therefore they would leave the camp at midnight and arrive in the heart of the little valley in the dark of the early morning, that dead time of the night

when men sleep most soundly. After that it would be a simple thing to do their work. There was not even the need of "soup" to blow the safe. They had the combination and could simply "talk to it" and have the door to the safe open.

There was nothing, in fact, which required more than one man for the job except that there might be an accident—a chance passer—and in that case there might be a call for guns that would shoot straight, and several of them, for the farmers of the Wickson Valley were of a fighting strain.

It was at the conclusion of this talk that they first heard the singing. It came with echoes through the narrow gorge which opened into the hollow, and it was silver thin and high:

"Que viva la rumba;
Que viva, que viva placer;
Que vivan las niñas, chulitas, bonitas,
Y guapas que saben querer."

Lew Cambridge was the first to reach the door.

"By the Great Horn Spoon!" he cried, for he was somewhat old-fashioned in his oaths. "It's a girl riding the Captain, and she's coming into the hollow!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE MIGHT OF INNOCENCE

THEY poured outdoors, the four giants, the bespectacled student, and pudgy Guinness. Beyond the little stream they saw the black stallion; he was neighing to one of his old companions which was staked out in the pasture.

On the back of the Captain was a girl whose wide-brimmed hat was pushed back from a face that made their hearts jump. She waved gaily to them and sang out: "Is Harry Gloster here?"

There was no answer for a moment. In fact, not one of them could speak until Macarthur muttered: "Let me talk to her! This Gloster is worth somewhere between ten and fifteen thousand to the gent that turns him over to the law. And if she's looking for him, you can lay to it that he's looking for her!"

So saying, he stepped out in front of the others and approached her, sweeping off his hat.

"Harry's away just now," he said, "but he'll be back! Climb down and stay a while."

She slipped from the saddle. She appeared younger and more frail than ever, contrasted with the black horse towering above her. He flattened his ears and snorted with anger as Macarthur drew nearer.

"Look out!" he warned Joan. "That big black devil is getting ready to put his teeth in you—"

But at that she laughed, and to the speechless amazement of them all, she turned and, reaching up, took the Captain by the forelock and pulled down his head. And he, like some fierce Samson beguiled by a Delilah, pricked his ears and made his eyes soft with content.

"You see," she said, advancing toward Macarthur again, "he's really as gentle as a lamb."

Behind her came the Captain and Macarthur hastily gave ground.

"Keep that black demon away from me!" he pleaded. "He nearly took my head off once."

She regarded him with surprise, then stripped the saddle and bridle from him, patted his sleek neck and waved him away to go frolic with the other horses in the pasture. And off he went with mane shaking with his speed and the ground quivering under the impact of his hoofs. He threw three swift circles around the enclosure, to show his happiness in being home again. Then he went about to visit the other horses. Cunning cruel as he might be to the men who strove to ride him, he was perfectly gentle with those of his own herd.

"What did you do to him?" asked Macarthur, still gaping at her.

"I gave him his own way," she said. "That was all there was to it!"

The others had drawn near by this time, and it appeared to Joan that she had never seen or heard of such men except Lee Haines. Haines, who was wise and strong enough to defy Sim Hargess and the whole town and liberate a prisoner from the jail single handed, was dead, but in all of these men saving two she could see qualities just as strong.

There stood four men, shoulder to shoulder, who seemed capable of breaking through a dozen ordinary people. And as for Guinness and Dud Rainey, she changed her mind about their inefficiency as she came nearer and was introduced to them one by one. For Guinness, in spite of his good-natured round face, had an eye as straight and cold as the eye of a bird, and about the lips of Dud Rainey there lingered a faint smile which, mild as his features were, gave a hint of quiet, limitless cruelty.

Yes, there was not one of the six who was not strong enough to be worthy of Lee Haines. And perhaps it was their sheer strength which had attracted Harry Gloster to them. They asked her how she had known that Gloster was one of them; if he himself had told her that he would meet her here, but she answered that she had simply deducted his membership in the gang from the fact that Haines had given his life to save him.

It was Fatty Guinness who suggested that she might be hungry. In an instant they were all busy. Some were cutting wood. Some were preparing food. All the old cabin was filled with bustle, half of which was the frantic effort to make the big room seem more presentable when Macarthur should bring the girl there.

In the meantime, fragments of the conversation between the chief and Joan were repeated, and the work of slicing bacon or brewing coffee, or sweeping out with a heavy pine bough, or kicking soiled clothes and tattered garments into an obscure corner, all ceased while the report was listened to which the last man to bring in wood or water had heard as he went past the couple.

"Macarthur is gone," was the first bulletin. "He's sitting there with a fool smile on his face. He looks like a six year old born without no brains. And he can't keep his eyes off'n the girl.

" 'How long can you be staying here to wait for Harry?' said Joe. 'Till sometime this afternoon?'

" 'Or longer than that,' says she. 'I'm in no hurry. It's so beautiful up here, I could stay a month and be happy.'

"Joe looks as if she'd tapped him between the eyes with a monkey wrench.

" 'A month?' he croaks. 'Ain't your folks going to miss you a little bit before that time comes along?'

" 'My father and mother are dead,' says she. 'There's only Buck Daniels to miss me. But then,

you know, I had to leave him sometime. And why shouldn't it be now?" "

It was Lew Cambridge who repeated this choice bit of talk which he had overheard to and from the pond to carry water, straining, to catch the syllables, ears which had been nicely trained in the greatest of all schools for hearing—burglary! His report was greeted with a murmur of the profoundest interest.

"You heard that, boys?" asked big Babe Cooney, his warrior face growing pale with emotion. "You heard that talk? She ain't had a mother and father to look after her. She don't know nothing about the dangers of the world. And now, damn my soul if she don't come up here and right in among *us* like a bird flying in out of a storm—but no harm ain't going to come to her! No harm ain't going to come to her!"

He repeated the solemn warning and rolled his terrible eyes around the room from face to face. But he found that all the others were equally busy scowling at one another as if to find some shadow of guilt revealed. All saving Dud Rainey, who was merely blinking behind his glasses, as usual, and rubbing the tips of his fingers carefully over his chin. Four suspicious glances centered sharply upon him. But, with a sigh, he resumed his work of sweeping again, unhurried, dreamy.

It was Sliver Martin who brought the next tidings. He staggered through the door with his face so lengthened that his cheeks seemed to be flat-

tened together. He let his armful of wood crash down upon the floor.

"My God, boys," he groaned, "listen to what I heard! Macarthur was pumpin' her as fast as he could work.

" 'You and Gloster been engaged quite a while?' he says.

" 'Engaged?' says she. 'Oh, no!'

" 'But ain't you come clear up here to see Harry?' says Macarthur.

" 'Yes. Why shouldn't I?' says she.

"I tell you, boys, that skunk Gloster has been deceiving her. Besides, what gent with half a heart would keep right on making love to a girl like that when he was outlawed and a price put on his head?"

"A gent that would murder two stiff-armed old sourdoughs would do that same thing," remarked Fatty Guinness. "Why damn a low hound like him! But you heard the chief's plan, and I say it's a mighty good one. We keep the girl here for bait long enough to draw in Gloster. Then tap him on the head unbeknownst to her and go down, one of us that ain't known in the town, and collect the reward. That's good business. The best thing that can happen to that girl is to have Gloster wiped up dry!"

"You think she loves him?" asked the mild voice of Dud Rainey.

"Listen to old four-eyes!" sneered Lew Cambridge, who had a natural antipathy for the quiet

voice and the careful diction of the little man. "Look at the old owl that sees everything by night and can't see nothing when the sun is shining on it for him. Why did she come up here if she ain't in love with him? You talk ridiculouser than hell, Dud!"

"You've learned a number of new words, I see," said Dud Rainey, and smiled upon him deliberately, showing every one of his white teeth.

And suddenly Lew Cambridge caught his breath and changed color. It was plainly to be seen that he knew he must resent this affront if he wished to keep his head high in the gang, and yet it was equally plain that he knew he was dealing with dynamite if he crossed the smaller man. But Fatty Guinness averted a crisis by stepping suddenly between the two.

"What d' you-all mean by this fool talk?" he inquired. "Are you going to spoil her party by starting a whole flock of shooting? If you scare her away, you'll have Macarthur himself in here with two guns ready for work."

"I said that anybody could see that she was in love," remarked Lew Cambridge, leaving out his former emphasis.

There was a general murmur of assent, but Rainey answered: "Perhaps she does. I don't know. But for my part, I don't think that she *could* love a man. She has a long-distance look in her eye—"

"What the devil are you driving at now?" asked Babe Cooney.

"Nothing," murmured Dud Rainey, and went on with his work.

Yet he had said enough to make them all watch her like hawks when at length she was called in for her dinner. It was noted that Joe Macarthur did not sit down with her to the table, although as chief of the band he had the right to assume the place of host.

Instead, he wandered out of the house into the open, wearing an expression half strained and half gloomy as if he had been brought in contact with something which he needed time to think over. But though they saw this to begin with, and they noticed Dud Rainey standing apart and studying the girl's face with his peculiar cold smile, as if he were striving to remember it for a drawing, the four others could see no reason to think Joan other than a very young, very innocent, and strangely charming girl.

She made herself as perfectly at home as if they were all old friends sitting at the table in her own ranch. She chatted away busily, and they watched her slim brown hands and the change and shimmer of light in her hair and the blue of her eyes with a hushed fascination.

She told them how she had won the black stallion, and then how he had brought her through the mountains, picking his own way, while she sat in the

saddle and let him go where he would. She told them how he had watched her fish, and how he had stood over her and observed the process of building a fire and cooking with a scrupulous interest as if it were something which he wished to learn for his own sake.

She told all this, moreover, with such enthusiasm, with such graceful and eager little gestures, that they laughed when she laughed and smiled when she smiled. They were so rapt in her words that they quite forgot about serving her and left it to Dud Rainey quietly to refill her tin cup with coffee and place more crisped slices of bacon on her plate.

Certainly there was nothing peculiar about her, except that she was more lovely, more naïve than any girl they had ever dreamed of, far less seen. And then, in the very midst of a sentence, she stopped speaking, straightened a little, and stared far off before her. They glanced hastily around at the door. But it was empty.

"What is it?" asked Babe Cooney, his rough voice reduced to a whisper.

"Hush! Don't you hear?" she asked them.

They heard it then for the first time, the faint dissonance of wild geese crying out of the heart of the sky. They heard it and looked back to the girl and now they saw the shadow of a smile beginning on her lips but never growing, a smile which was neither sad nor happy.

But suddenly every man looked thoughtfully

down, and into their minds rushed the same picture of a wedge of the wild geese streaming north and north to a land of blue lakes and shadowy virgin forests and mountains from whose heads the snow never melted.

CHAPTER XXVII

AN UNEXPECTED MERCY

PRESIDENT OSCAR FERN of the Wickson Bank was one of those persons who are envied not for their brains, but for their luck. He controlled the banking business of the rich little irrigation district not because men believed in his business intelligence, but because there was a vast confidence in his good luck. If luck served Oscar Fern well, it must necessarily serve his depositors well, also.

When his career was mentioned, it was always recounted how he "just happened" to have bought one of the largest of the old cattle ranches in the valley just before water was brought in. And again, he "just happened" to have good fortune and hang onto his lands after the first water boom had failed and men were selling out right and left because of the terrible pressure of the water taxes.

Oscar did not sell, not because he saw through the present difficulty into a radiant future, but because he had not the energy to split up his big property and get rid of it in small parcels. So he survived the blue days and became wealthy.

When he established his bank there was no competitor. As a matter of fact, people have a greater respect for luck than they have for intelligence. They respected not Oscar himself but the quality which had fallen from heaven upon him.

And as Samuel Carney, the lean and gray headed, terrier-like man who was cashier of the bank, walked down the street this morning, nearly every man who passed him said: "There goes the brains of the Wickson Bank. Fern is a mighty lucky fellow to get such a man for mere wages! One of these days Carney will be made a partner, and then watch his dust! He's got the genius!"

Such was the atmosphere of adulation through which Samuel Carney walked. It had lightened his step on many a back and forth from the grind of the work at the bank. But to-day it did not help him. The morning was very hot, although the spring was not yet old and the hour was early; but there was a little foretaste of the blast of the summer sun, and the sidewalk burned Carney's feet through the thin soles of his shoes.

He hurried on to get out of the heat, and yet as he found that he was coming so rapidly to the bank he slowed his pace again. The bank had suddenly become like a plague house to him. In that building he had built his reputation. In that bank he had established himself as a man of spotless integrity, of sound mind, and scrupulously honest business methods.

It had been the great jewel of his life, this repute for honor and honesty. His neighbors had brought to him their little fine points of behavior. He split the straws for them and showed them the right path. He was surrounded, in the eyes of the good people of the town of Wickson, with all the solemn atmosphere of a judge.

This was the thing which had been enshrined in the bank. Now he was to throw the idol away. He was to deceive his very employer, share in the loot that a band of ruffians secured, and afterward he must continue in his place, wear a solemn face about the crime, and in a year or more, perhaps, gravely accept the place of partner in the firm from which he had stolen.

As he thought of all this he grew cold at heart in spite of the heat of the day, and he went on with his fighting jaw thrust out. And, like a cunning man, he began to prove to himself that he had made a bargain worth while, after all, by estimating for the hundredth time the gains as contrasted with the losses. To begin with, there was the vital need which he had had to meet.

There was the musical training for which Clare had eaten out her heart in yearning, and yet in silence, since her childhood. There was the privilege of sending his wife to New York for the best medical treatment which might, even now, save her. Yes, fifteen thousand dollars would easily do all of these things.

The fifteen thousand, being spent away from the home town, would awaken no suspicions. Moreover, who could ever connect him with such a crime? It could not be! His position in the town of Wickson was a brazen tower of strength. No eye would dream of looking toward him. And, therefore, no eye would see him.

He saw, then, as a result of his connivance at the theft, a solid financial gain which would be an inestimable boon to his family and which would in no wise endanger his position. But could the taking of a hundred thousand dollars from the bank be really looked upon as a barren theft? No, he felt that it was not.

In the long course of his connection with the bank he had surely given them a hundredfold more than the salary which had been paid to him. He could point back, during the last three years alone, to definite places where his advice had been sought for and accepted and out of which the bank had actually gained more in solid cash than the hundred thousand of which he now proposed to deprive it.

Fortified with these thoughts, he advanced more easily toward the bank and opened the door, whispering softly, as was his custom, through his teeth. He almost ran into the president himself as he stepped inside, and he gasped with a touch of horror. The swelling form and the rosy, smiling face of Oscar Fern might have been a nightmare. This was

a whole hour earlier than the time at which the president generally appeared.

What could have brought him here this day of all days? A fire of shame and terror penetrated to the heart of the cashier.

"What's wrong, Sammy?" asked Fern. "You look like the devil—all shot, for a fact. No sleep?"

"No sleep," muttered Carney, his eyes on the floor. And although he fought to look up he could not.

"This damned touch of hot weather was what did it," Fern declared; "kind of bothered me myself!"

And he laughed apologetically, as if there was something ridiculous in the thought that anything could really trouble him in his sleep. Carney glanced up, curiously. No, nothing could bother Oscar Fern. No qualms of conscience, at least, would ever stab his brain in the middle of the night and make him stare into the dark with a weakly fluttering heart and a sense of mortal shame and fear.

He tried to rouse his own anger. This man should have doubled his salary three years ago—and should have doubled it again.

"What you need to do is to take a day off," Fern suggested. "Damned if you don't look hard hit!"

"A day off?" said Carney, seizing easily on grounds which would serve as a basis to work himself into an anger. "A day off? Where the devil would things be?"

The president caught his breath, frowned, and then looked somewhat agape over the head of his cashier.

"Doggoned if you ain't right, Sammy," he murmured. "Matter of fact, you never do take a day off, do you?"

"If a vacation came up and stared me in the face," said Carney, "I wouldn't know what to call it."

"That so? I was talking to Green on the phone. He says it's true the F. L. and M. is going to build a branch line into the valley."

Carney listened with half his mind. It was well enough to turn the subject, but he brooded savagely on his injuries as he went on into his room. They had brought it on themselves, he vowed. And then he flung himself into his work with a savage energy.

But, in spite of himself, he found himself coming to a pause every now and then, his eye possessed with a hazy vision of his wife, Agnes, meeting him at the door some night with a white face and saying: "I know it all! I know it all! Oh, Sammy dear, we won't talk about it. I don't accuse you. I know it was for Clare's sake and mine—but, oh, God, Sammy, we've thrown away our honor and we can never get it back again! We've thrown away our honor and nothing in the world can ever bring it back!"

Always he came out of this dream to hear his assistant murmuring beside him: "I say, Mr. Car-

ney, if you'll excuse me for interrupting you, I want to bring this little matter to your attention and—"

When noon came he did not eat. Instead he took a walk through the fierce sun. He filled his lungs to the bottom with air. Then he came back and went at his work again.

The heavy footfall of the fat president entered the bank an hour and a half later. Oscar Fern kept Paris hours as far as the noonday meal was concerned. And Carney ground his teeth.

"You fat faced fool!" he snarled to himself. "You have the front. But who does the work? Who has the brains? Who's holding you up? I do it! I do it!"

Here there was a murmur from the little muffled bell in his room. It was a summons from the president, and he went in slowly, gathering up on the way two letters about which he must consult Fern. What jokes those consultations were! For five years he had never been crossed.

He found Fern tilted back in his chair with his thumbs hooked into the armholes of his vest, his rubber heels on the top of the desk, and a fat cigar in his mouth. He was frowning at the ceiling and rolling the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, champing at it nervously. He paid no attention to Carney as the latter entered.

"Here's another letter from Dundee about the terms," began Carney.

"Damn Dundee!" said Oscar Fern. "I want to talk to you, Sammy."

"Heard a good yarn?" asked the cashier with a secret contempt.

"How much money have you saved?"

It was a bolt from the blue. Perspiration stood out on Carney's upper lip. He wiped it away with the tips of his fingers.

"Why—a few thousand—"

"How's Agnes?" blurted out the president.

It made Carney start, almost rise from his chair.

"She's the same."

"You ought to get her out of town."

Silence.

"Carney, you have to get her out of town. I saw her while I was going home for lunch. She smiled at me from your door. She looked like the very devil, Carney. I—her face has been haunting me!"

"And me!" groaned Carney.

"Ah, lad!" murmured Oscar Fern, and laid his fat hand on the shoulder of his cashier. "And never a word from you about her. That's what's been eating your heart out? But no talk; no complaining!"

"Sammy, there's going to be a change—a great big change! In the first place, you get a bonus of five thousand in hard cash payable in ten minutes to yourself. In the second place, you get a raise. You could use another fifteen hundred a year.

"My girl tells me that your Clare has always wanted to go away to study music. I dunno why. Seems to me that she plays real pretty on the piano the way it is. But if she's got her heart set on it—why, she ought to go! And go she shall, Sammy.

"And there's another thing—when I seen you this morning looking so damned thin and black around the eyes, it hurt me, Sammy. My God, am I a slave driver? Are my dollars just drops of blood? No, sir! I'd throw the damned money into the river first! I'd give it back to the place it came from. And one of the places is from you.

"Sammy, you pack up to-night and hop a train to-morrow. You're going to take Agnes to New York. You're going to get her cured and you're going to take in the sights for yourself—"

"Wait—" gasped Carney.

"Well?"

"Oscar—Oscar—"

His face had convulsed. A shuddering weakness entered him. He hid his face with his gnarled fingers and the sobs swelled in him. He fought them back, and they choked him.

"Good God! Good God!" whispered Oscar Fern.

He stole tiptoe to the door. He locked it, and as if it were not security enough, he put his thick shoulders against it, and turning, stared at his cashier, sweating. Was this Bulldog Carney? Was this the man of iron?

He went back and put his arms around the thin, labor-stooped shoulders.

"Sammy!" he whispered. "Don't do it, Sammy! It makes me sick! It makes a fool out of me. Don't do it, Sammy!"

Tears began to roll down his fat, rosy face.

"I ain't through, old friend," he gasped. "I never thought of it before. I never thought about what *you* might be needing. But just ask me what you want. I don't care what. I'll give it. The whole damn bank ain't worth a thing like this—"

A choked, groaning voice from Samuel Carney answered: "I am a dog, Oscar. I'm a low hound. I'm worse than that. I'm lower than a snake—"

"You?"

"Listen to me. I got to tell you, Oscar. I'll tell you the truth and then get out!"

And tell the truth he did, haltingly, without excuses, the whole horrible tale of how Macarthur had approached him, of how he had been talked into a plot, of how he had given the combination of the safe, of the fifteen thousand dollars he was to get.

He told it all with his face still in his hands, his head bowed low, and after he had ended, for some time, he heard the thick, hurried panting of Oscar Fern. Then that familiar, fat hand reached his and took the screen away from his face.

"Dear old Sammy!" he heard Oscar saying.

He looked up, mortally ashamed of his tears, but he was comforted by the gray face and the trembling

lips of Oscar. And there was something so childish in the fat man's staring round eyes of horror and grief, that he almost wanted to laugh.

"Man, man!" gasped Oscar Fern. "I dunno how you could of been tempted like that and not fallen. Thank God, you were strong enough to tell me—out of your own free will—"

"Don't say that!" groaned Carney. "You forced it out of me with that great kind heart of yours, and—"

"Hush up! Shut up, damn it! Why, Sammy, I feel like this here thing had made us brothers. That skunk—that snake Macarthur—we'll be ready when he comes—"

"Not that, Oscar. I'd be a murderer if I let him walk into a trap."

"When was this to happen?"

"To-night."

"Then warn him off. Can you send a messenger?"

"Yes."

"Do that. But just in case the messenger doesn't reach him in time, we'll be ready, Sammy! I'll have guns enough ready to blow them to bits!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WILD HEART

"AT least this is sure," said Buck Daniels, "she's riding one of the finest hosses that ever stepped and she's riding it like a wild woman!"

They had come to a small stream in the evening of the day. The prints of a pair of real hoofs were deep in the bank beneath them, there was a polished streak on a big rock in the middle of the stream as if a shod hoof had slipped, and on the farther bank they could see where the horse had landed again.

"She jumped her hoss across that!" breathed Harry Gloster.

Then, in silence, they hunted for shallow water, crossed the ford, and returned to the trail.

"And you can't guess where she's bound?" asked Daniels. "No idea at all! I know that she's never been up here before. She's just wandering. And what I'm surest of is that she'll never come back."

"We'll find her, though, and bring her," insisted Gloster. "We'll use force if we have to. But we can't let her—"

"Force?" cried Buck Daniels. "Son, don't you know that she's Dan Barry's daughter?"

"Who was Dan Barry? And what does that mean?"

"I'll tell you about Dan later on. But it means that I'd rather handle a raw lightning flash than try to *make* her do anything."

He let Gloster brood over that until in the twilight, they halted and cooked their meal. They had become good friends in a few hours of trailing this day. As for Gloster, he was as open as noonday. He described frankly his adventures from the moment he returned from his hunting trip and found his two partners at the mine dead, to the time he heard the girl singing near the schoolhouse and how he had talked to her and tried to find her, which was like chasing a shadow.

"But since then," he went on, "I've been through a couple of kinds of hell, yet I've never had the thought of her out of mind."

"Then," said Buck, "I'll tell you about her father; that'll cure you, son."

There by the fire, as they finished their coffee, he told the story of Dan Barry, how he had come out of the south, drifting north and north, how Joe Cumberland had taken him in and had to keep him by force, of how he grew up to love Kate Cumberland; of how, at last, he married her; of how a girl was born to Kate; of how they lived happily in a cabin among the mountains with Dan tamed at last,

so it seemed; of how he had taken up the defense of a fugitive for justice and by that had been led onto a long blood trail and outlawry.

"Until at last," said Buck Daniels, "Kate saw that there was a wildness in him which would never go out. She could see that Joan had the same spark in her. She had no fear of animals, just like Dan; and she could do all sorts of queer things with them. Finally she made up her mind that, for Joan's sake, she had to leave Dan.

"Dan had taken Joan, that wee mite of a girl, up into the mountains with him to the cave he was living in. Kate trailed her baby there. And she found Joan as wild as a little rabbit. She stole Joan away and brought her down to the ranch.

"I and a couple of other men stayed there with her. We knew that Dan would come for Joan sooner or later, and we knew that we had to try to keep him away, and we knew that we didn't have a ghost of a chance to do it, him being a tiger in a fight.

"So finally one night when we were all sitting around the fire and Joan getting sleepy, she raised up her head with a queer look. Then she got up and went over to the window and pulled the curtain aside and looked out into the black of the night. It sure was a ghostly thing to see a mite of a kid do.

"And pretty soon we heard that whistle of Dan Barry's coming away off in the night and we knew

that Joan had heard it first. It gave me the horrors. Kate sent one look at her baby and knew that it was either Joan or Dan that had to be sacrificed.

"She ran out of the house and met Dan coming down the path. She told him to go back, that she still loved him, but that he would ruin all their lives if he didn't go away. I was looking out watching with a gun in my hand and my hand shaking like a leaf.

"I seen Dan standing in the path with his hat pushed back from his face smiling at her. He started walking toward her. She warned him. He kept on. And then she fired.

"His wolf-dog stood over his body and snarled at us until Dan was dead, and then the dog and the black hoss went tearing off through the night. I picked Dan up in my arms. He'd been a lion of a man when he was alive. But being dead, he wasn't hardly no more'n a boy in his weight.

"But that was the end of Dan Barry, Gloster. And what I've been waiting for all these years has been in fear that the same wildness would come out in Joan. And it came! It started the night she talked to you at the dance.

"And now she's cut loose from me and gone off by herself, she'll never come back and nothing can make her. It's a wild goose chase we're following, Gloster!"

The big man had listened like a child, and now he sighed and looked down to his hands, as though he

found a subtle comfort in the contemplation of the strength which was in them.

"I'll find a way," he said at last.

Buck Daniels shook his head.

"Because," said Gloster, "no matter what a man may be, a girl is different. The woman in her makes her different."

They did not speak again, but by mutual consent they packed again, put the saddles once more on the weary horses, and pushed on. So it was that they came, when the last of the sunset light had faded out, to a rough cleft in the face of the mountain which lifted its head a full five hundred feet above them.

It was too dark to follow the trail farther, and Buck Daniels suggested that they camp for the night where they were. Accordingly, there they put down their blankets, and in five minutes Buck Daniels was snoring noisily.

But the thoughts of Harry Gloster gave him no rest. The bright shining of the stars became entangled with the wild tale that Daniels had told him. The full horror of it had only gradually sunk in upon his brain, but now he could not tell which was more blood-curdling—the slaying of Dan Barry by Joan's mother, or those first stirrings of mysterious wild instincts in Joan herself.

He saw, at length, that there was no sleep for him on this night. So he pulled on his boots and stepped away for a walk and a quiet pipe by himself. He

turned down the narrow defile. At the place where the rock walls came together, he could find the perfect seclusion which he wanted.

But the rock walls did not join. Instead, the narrow defile twisted to one side and presently he found himself in a large hollow carved mysteriously out of the mountain, a sort of natural fort with solid cliffs for walls. There were trees scattered here and there. He saw horses grazing, and, above all, his eye caught a gleam of light.

It was a startling thing to know that there was a human residence here in the heart of the mountains, but he now made out the big outlines of the house and he approached at once, not boldly, but with a sufficient stealth, for there might be reasons enough why the man who dwelt there chose to live in solitude. There were the horses, too, which must not sight or scent him unless he chose to be betrayed by their neighing.

The door of the house was open. All was silent within, and the smoky lantern having been turned down low, threw the feeblest of lights. He stole past the door and, glancing within, he made out two or three bunks against the farther wall, with a man in each. He could see enough of the rest of the room to make out that it was furnished in the most primitive and makeshift fashion.

He had seen enough, moreover, to make him understand that it would be very wise if he did not venture in among these men or wake them with

questions. Men did not sleep with rifles leaning beside them if they were of a pacific character.

He retreated a little into the deeper darkness to think over his position. Some of these fellows might well have seen Joan if she had come this way. But it took time before he could make up his mind to risk inquiry.

Then, at a little distance from the larger building he saw a second which was a small shed, and, starting to investigate this also, he found that the door of the shed was likewise open. No sooner had he approached it than he inhaled a fragrance of evergreens.

He leaned in. A bed of evergreens, in fact, had been piled on the floor, and the pine boughs had been leaned against the corners of the little room as if by way of decoration. By this time his eyes were a little more accustomed to the murkiness, he saw that the blankets on the bed were tenantless.

Whoever had been sleeping there had risen and gone out, it appeared. In that case, he was in the most imminent danger of being discovered when the other man returned. And in the case of such a discovery he had no doubt that the challenge he would receive would be an unheralded bullet without a word of warning.

He was wrong. For at the very moment of his withdrawal, before he had time to turn, he heard a voice murmur behind him: "Who's there? Put

your hands up and don't turn around! Who's there?"

The words were formidable enough, but it was the voice which had a meaning for Gloster.

"Joan!" he gasped. "Joan!"

He whirled upon her. She slipped away beyond his arms. He blundered a pace after her and then saw that it was useless to pursue a phantom.

"It's Harry Gloster, Joan!" he pleaded. "Don't you understand?"

She was silent, leaning her back against the trunk of a small sapling that deepened the shadow of the night upon her. Yet, Gloster could feel her eyes watching him closely.

"Joan!" he repeated in a wild alarm, as she neither stirred nor spoke. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

He strode into the shadow of the tree, but her voice stopped him short.

"Don't come closer. Stay there, Harry. I—it chokes me to have you closer!"

And, with a sickening of the heart, he knew that he had lost her indeed.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE UNTAMABLE SOUL

HE stepped back out of the deeper dark under the tree as though there had been a poison in its influence, and, when he had waited for her to speak, he said at last: "Will you come out here where I can see you, Joan? The starlight is dim enough, but it may help me to understand what's wrong."

She waited another moment, and then she came slowly toward him. When she paused, he could see her face, half by guess. And yet he could not understand.

"I know," he said at last. "You've finally believed the lies they tell about me. You believe that I killed Nichols and Springer. Is that it, Joan?"

She shook her head.

"It isn't that, Harry."

"Then what have I done?"

"Nothing. You see, all that's wrong is wrong in me."

Her voice was half sad, half wondering. "Don't ask me any more," she added.

"Tell me only why you're here?"

"I came up here hunting for you."

"Joan!"

He would have gone to her, but she stopped him with a small gesture.

"But I know now that I was really hunting for something else. After Lee Haines set you free, every one knew that you belonged to his gang. And I thought that his horse might guide me up to the rendezvous, where I'd find you. He brought me here—"

"Is that the gang of Lee Haines in the big house?"

"Yes."

"God in heaven. You're in their hands?"

"There's no harm in them for me. From Joe Macarthur to—"

"Who?"

"Joe Macarthur."

"He's there?"

"He's the new leader. Don't you know that?"

"I've never been one of them. Did they tell you that I was?"

"Yes."

"It was a trap, Joan. Macarthur hates me. I never followed Haines. I never knew him until the day before he freed me from the jail. But we'll talk of it afterward. Now we must go at once—quickly, Joan, before one of those sleeping tigers in there hears us!"

She shook her head.

"I can't go, Harry."

He said the words over to himself. Then a possible explanation came into his mind.

"You've found a man here that you care for!"

"Not one, but all of them—"

"Are murderers!"

"They're free men," said Joan.

"What lies have they been telling you about themselves?"

"It's in their faces, Harry. It's in nothing they say."

"Joan, some strange idea has come to you. Come away with me. We'll talk of it when you're back in your father's house. And I'll teach you to care for me again. Believe me, Joan, by all that's holy!"

"I care more for you now, Harry, than I ever did."

"Do you mean that?"

"Ah, a thousand times! But don't come near me! Don't come a step nearer!"

"Joan, you drive me mad! Why must I stay away?"

"Because, if you touched me, something would break in me. I'd laugh—I'd cry—I don't know what. But my heart would nearly break, Harry. I know that!"

He could not help but come close. She made no effort to escape him and so, suddenly, she was in his arms. But when he leaned to her he found he could not touch her lips. It was as if an arm stronger than his held him back.

"Let me go, Harry! Let me go," she was whispering.

"Not if God can help me to keep you!"

"God would not bring that unhappiness into your life."

"Joan, have you gone mad?"

"I've seen the truth about myself."

"Let me tell you that truth. Here I can see only a shadow of all that you are. But even that shadow is beautiful as a bright morning. No king in the world is as great a man as I if I can hear you say that you love me."

"I do love you, dear."

"Then come with me."

"It would ruin your life. You don't know me, Harry. My heart is aching to let you take me away with you, and to give up thinking, and to put all the burden of my life on your shoulders—"

"They're strong enough to hold it. Listen to me, Joan, I've never fought for things worth having. I've played along through my life. But now I'm ready to work, and what I'll do for you—Joan, I'd tear the hills up by the roots for your sake!"

"We would have one month of happiness, Harry, and then all the rest would be sorrow!"

"Give me your trust, and I'll build happiness for both of us and base it on solid rock!"

"It's that which I dread. What would you do, Harry?"

"Make you a home for our family."

"That's what I dread. I want to be free to ride north in the winter and south in the summer. I don't want to be rooted in one place like a tree."

"Then we'll live in a camp wagon—or we'll live in the saddle."

She freed herself from his hands. And he felt that it was a hopeless battle after that instant.

"Will you let me try to tell you everything?"

"For God's sake, do."

"When I went on the trail with the Captain, I thought that I was trying to find you. But I was wrong. What I really was hunting for was what I guessed at when I first saw you—strength, strong enough to be free and to stand by yourself. And I felt that there was something behind you—that wild freedom into which you could take me with you. But you came to-night claiming me, reaching for me—"

"My head's spinning like a top, Joan. I'm fighting hard to understand, but I never said that I wanted to own you."

"You don't call it that. But you want to marry me."

"God willing. And then work for you with all the strength of my soul and my hands."

"Ah, there it is! Every bit of work you did for me would be another anchor weight around my feet keeping me with you. I'd owe you gratitude and pity for your pain and trouble."

"I'd have servants for you, Joan. There'd be no drudgery for you."

"Do you dream that I dread just physical work? No, no! Not that, but the freedom, Harry. Every spring and every fall when the wind blows in a certain way and the wild geese are crying, there would come a time when I would wish to go."

"Then you could go, Joan, and come back again."

"Leave you—and you not knowing where I had gone? Harry, I could do it—but, oh, it would kill you! I know it would. I was never meant to give a man happiness. I was meant only to find the one man I could love—one whom I loved more than myself—one whom I loved enough to give up my dreams."

"For what, Joan?"

"Ah, if I understood why, I could conquer it. But all I know is that sometimes when the geese are flying it seems to me that I shall die unless I can follow them to some glorious place—and now that I've started to follow them, Harry, I'll never turn back!"

Had he been a smaller man he would have stormed at her. But as it was he waited for a while, realizing the inevitable, determined to battle against it still, but bowing to it for the time being.

He said soberly, after a moment: "Good-by, Joan, for a little while."

"For both our sakes, Harry, it's good-by forever."

Instead of answering he stepped closer to her and,

taking her face between both his big hands, he tilted back her head and kissed her lips. They were as cold as her cheeks, and her eyes, he thought, looked up to him as if he were as far removed as the stars above them.

CHAPTER XXX

THE FOURTH WHITE PEBBLE

HE went back to the entrance to the hollow and, looking around, he saw Joan still watching him. So he went on to Buck Daniels sleeping at the mouth of the gap. He shook Buck into wakefulness, and when he was sitting up in his blanket, told him briefly and clearly everything that had happened. When he had finished he waited for a reply.

But, first of all, Buck found his pipe, filled it very slowly, and lighted it. He puffed away at it for a time.

"I knew when I hit the trail," he said at length, "that it ain't no good. It was the same way with the trails that I took after Dan Barry. Once I tried to bring him back to Kate. And the way I worked it was by insulting Dan. I hit him across the face in front of a lot of other gents.

"Then I turned and ran for it. He came fast, but I had a relay of hosses fixed up, and they got me back to the ranch in the nick of time. And handling Joan is like handling the ghost of Dan. There ain't nothing we can do for her. Our work is ended, Harry."

"We leave her here with this gang of cut-throats?"

"She's safe enough with them. There ain't a man born that wouldn't go barefooted to Jerusalem for her if she asked him to."

"You're going back to the ranch?"

"I dunno. It sort of takes the interest out of life for me. I was fighting all these years to keep away what's happened. Now it's here. She seen the wild geese flying. She's listened to them and she's heard things that you and me and nobody else could never understand. Let her go her own way, Harry. You'd just be spoiling her life to follow."

Harry shook his head.

"I can't give her up," he said. "And the farther she is away from me, the more I want her. Buck, I've got a plan that may sound crazy, but it's one I'm going to stick to."

"Lemme hear it."

"I'm going to join Macarthur's gang."

"You'll join a slug of lead out of Macarthur's gun, you mean."

"I don't think he can turn me down. The rest of his men will want me, simply because I'm outlawed. They'll think I'm more valuable than I am. And they'll vote Macarthur down and take me in."

"That way I'll be close to Joan while she's with them. And when she leaves, I leave! And suppose that you, Buck, hung around in the offing and waited for a chance. I don't know what might come

up, but there's always a chance, you know. Two men can do a lot. You and I might be able to get Joan away. Does it sound good to you?"

"To me," murmured Buck, "it sounds like fool talk.

He added: "But I was always nine-tenths fool myself. If you want to take the big chance, I'll take the little one. But nothing will come out of this but a considerable bunch of hell fire for all of us. You mark my words, Harry!"

But the big man could not be moved. He saddled his horse, while Buck did the same and started off down the mountainside to find covert. Gloster himself, mounting, rode straight back through the defile and into the hollow. Joan had disappeared from the door of her hut. No doubt, by this time, she had shrugged away the thought of him and banished whatever regrets might have lingered in that strange, cold heart of hers.

Indeed, as he thought of it he ground his teeth and swore that he would not go another step on this wild trail. But still he went on. For the more distant she became the more all the man in him rose up in a fierce determination to fight the great fight until he had won her. And as he remembered her slender grace and thought of his own huge power which nothing in his life had ever fully taxed, it seemed impossible that he should fail.

Straight to the door of the hut he went, dismounted, and striding into the room, stamped

heavily upon the floor. Six figures started up. But only five guns glistened. For Gloster had stepped to Macarthur in the farther corner and, as the chief started up, his wrists were caught and his arms were twisted up behind his back.

He was only momentarily at a disadvantage, of course, for the guns of his followers were trained on his assailant. But in the meantime, this was a shameful thing, to be mastered by the hands of any single man. He writhed with all his power. The answer was merely an increased power.

"Be quiet, Macarthur," said Harry Gloster. "Be quiet, or I'll break your arms for you. Boys, hold off with your guns till I have a talk with you. Macarthur here has a grudge against me. But I've come up here to join you if you'll take me. My name's Harry Gloster. And the country's too hot for me. What do you say? Do I get a hearing?"

"Take him off!" groaned Macarthur, crimson with his mortification. "Blow his head off, Babe. The skunk took me by surprise—"

"Wait a minute," said Babe, stretching the sleep out of his arms and deliberately dropping his gun back into his holster. "If there's only one, I guess that there ain't any need of making a hurry call on the lead. What are you aiming at, Gloster?"

"At a chance to talk without having Macarthur blow my head off."

Here he shifted both of Macarthur's arms, held them with the mighty grip of his one hand, and

then snatched the weapons from the holsters of the leader, for Macarthur wore two guns.

"That's a lot better," he declared, and rising, he stepped away from his victim.

Macarthur leaped to his feet with a yell of rage and whirled at Gloster. But his own weapons covered him, and the rest of the gang stood by, if not indifferent, at least more than a little amused. They respected the fighting qualities of Joe Macarthur. Yet they were not at all unwilling to see him somewhat humbled.

"Damn you all!" shouted Macarthur. "What d'ye mean by it? Dud, lend me a gun and I'll—"

"There ain't anybody else in sight," declared Sliver Martin, coming back from the door. "We got this game in our hand. Might as well let him take a trick or two to begin with. What you after, Gloster? A place with us, d'ye mean?"

"What else is there left for me?" asked Gloster with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "I'd hunt up a crew where the leader didn't hate my heart, but I want to work with *men*, and that's what Haines's old crowd is made up of by all reports. What I say is: give me a chance, fellows. You'll find I'll go as far as any of you!"

"If that's the run of it," said Macarthur, "we'll talk first—and you and me'll have our little party afterward, Gloster. You say you came up here to join?"

"No, I came up here on the trail of a girl."

His frankness staggered the leader.

"Talk straight, Gloster. You came for the girl and you didn't find her—now you want to join us?"

"I found her. And I found that I wasn't wanted." He managed to smile. "I found that out and I found out who you fellows were. It's an ill wind that blows nobody good, old son. Will you give me a try?"

Macarthur spoke slowly.

"This gent comes up here," he said, "talks to Joan, finds she don't want nothing to do with him, and then comes begging us to take him in. What he wants ain't action, but just a chance to be near her. Ain't that reasonable? Besides, what I say is that we don't want to have in the gang any skunk that would murder two harmless old sourdoughs. Am I right?"

"Right!" blurted out Babe Cooney.

"Right!" chimed in the others, with the exception of Dud Rainey. The latter, as usual when he was most thoughtful, was rubbing his finger tips lightly over his chin.

"If he killed the two old boys," he said quietly, "we certainly don't want him."

"If he killed them?" roared Macarthur. "If he didn't, who the hell did? Ain't they got a price laid on his head? Did he stand his trial or did he cut and run for it?"

"Does he look like murder to you?" asked Dud, as quietly as ever.

It was only a small argument, but it came at exactly the right time and, in contrast with the heap of damning statements from Macarthur, this suggestion had a peculiar weight. All eyes swept to Harry Gloster, and the sight of his frank and open face told heavily in his favor.

"Besides," went on Dud, "what have *you* got against him, Joe?"

It was another facer for Joe. He considered Dud with actual hatred for a moment and then, thrusting out his jaw, he turned on Gloster.

"You tell it," he said.

"We had a little argument," said Gloster. "That was all. But Macarthur took it to heart."

The leader lost some of his purple color of rage. He had not expected that Gloster would fail to take advantage of this chance to tell how he had floored the gun-fighter.

"We'll vote on this thing," he said. "Don't have to do it out loud. Pick up some pebbles, boys. White ones let him in and black ones turn him out. There's my hat to drop them in."

Pebbles were immediately at hand, for most of the floor of the building was gravel. The site had been selected for the cabin because it was near wood and water, and the frame had been built even around two or three large stones which cropped out nearer the western end of the apartment.

The voting idea was eagerly taken up by the gang. They hurried to pick up their particular choice. And

going to the hat they dropped in their votes. Macarthur raised his sombrero and poured out the contents into the palm of his hand.

"Three of us have voted him in," he remarked, "and there's three that want him to stay out. I'm one of them, and since by rights I ought to have two votes anyway, and vote again and that vote is to—"

"Wait a minute," broke in Gloster as he saw the tide turning against him. "I've got something to add."

He went to the end of the room and leaned over a projecting rib of limestone which the soot from the fire had only succeeded in turning a dark gray. Over this he bent, laid hold upon it with his hands, and began to lift.

But the rock was lodged deep in the earth, and that earth had been tramped solid as stone itself. Yet he increased his effort instead of giving up his purpose, whatever that might be. The members of the gang gathered to watch, half in wonder and half in appreciation.

For they needed no scales to tell them that Gloster was attempting to budge a great weight. Even the mass of stone which projected above the ground appeared more than any one man could stir and there was an unknown portion of the whole mass hidden from sight, besides which, it was fixed in its place.

"Don't try to pull the mountain up by the roots," cautioned Dud Rainey, but the chuckle which followed this sally was very short.

They were far too much interested in the effort of Gloster. Their faces worked with the pain of sympathy and their hands closed. He had sunk to a half-crouching position, now. His back bowed with the immense pressure. His arms quivered under the strain as ropes tremble when horses pull against them, yet still that pressure was being increased.

It was as though there was a fountain of power in his body and this was being drained to the last drop. Now his shoulders began to rise. His head bowed between them and his swelled neck was purple with congested blood.

There was a slight noise.

"It's started!" gasped Babe Cooney who, strong man as he was, was gazing now as a child stares when it hears a fable.

But it had not been budged. The noise had come from the ripping of Gloster's coat over one shoulder. The swelling, iron-hard muscles had parted the stout cloth as if it were tissue paper.

He sank a bit lower. The ground was not particularly moist, but his feet were sinking into it. The seam of his trousers over the bulging thigh parted. Now his whole body jerked up a fraction of an inch—the stone had been budged.

"By God!" whispered some one. "He's winning!"

There was not a man who had not crouched in sympathy, saving only Dud Rainey, who was still rubbing his finger tips across his chin.

"Now!" they muttered in a faint chorus.

For suddenly the stone had risen six inches. They were beginning to guess at the full hugeness of its mass. But it caught again and then with a great wrench, Gloster tore it out. The entire lower section of it was gleaming white, a deep and ragged hole was left in the floor, and walking as though he were carrying a mere armful of wood, Gloster crossed the room and cast down the mass at the feet of Macarthur.

The very ground quaked under the impact. Gloster stepped back, his purple face distorted with the effort.

"You were wrong, Joe," he said. "There are four white pebbles instead of three! And I stay in the crowd, eh?"

Whatever hatred Macarthur might have felt for the new applicant, he was swept away for the moment by his enthusiasm for Gloster's physical power. He clapped him heartily on the shoulder.

"Harry," he said, "you're one of us, and as good **a one as any!**"

CHAPTER XXXI

BLOOD BROTHERS

So Harry Gloster became a sworn member of the band. It was a curious ceremony, the taking of that oath. Macarthur called upon Dud Rainey to administer it for the very good reason that slang cannot be a solemn medium, and there was no one but Dud capable of speaking pure English.

But if the others had not the language for their parts, they at least made an effective background. They took off their sombreros and put on grave frowns as they stood about in a semi-circle facing Gloster, each man with his eyes riveted upon the face of the new member. Upon his good faith all their lives might depend, for all they knew, before that very night was ended.

They, who would have thought nothing of perjury in a court of law, would sooner have cut off their right hands than break the word pledged to their fellows in crime. For if faith in such cases began to be broken, there was no holding together, and if they could not hold together, they would be hunted down like dogs by the servants of the law.

They were putting their lives into the hands of this new man. No wonder, then, that as they faced him, they searched him to the very soul.

"Gloster," said Dud Rainey, "there's no Bible in this oath. There's not a word about God. We put a man upon his own honor, because we know that no matter what any of us may have done, every man here has that honor. Keep that in mind. And then listen to me and repeat after me."

He began speaking, making a pause here and there so that Gloster might repeat what he had said:

"I, Harry Gloster, give my honor and pledge my word that I shall truly and faithfully live with all the men who are now with me. If I have any old quarrel or grievance against any of them, I shall bury it and never bring it to the light again.

"I shall hold the safety of the man I least care for among these men before me to be of greater importance to me than my own safety. I shall never fail them in danger, but with all my strength and with all my ability I shall stand at their sides.

"What the chief commands me to do, I shall do no matter what I may think of it myself with one exception, always, that he shall not have the right to order me to kill any man, and understanding that in a vote the majority of the men will overrule the command of the chief.

"With all these things in mind, I give my honor and I pledge my word that when there is work to be done, whether we are fighting or fleeing, I shall

hold every man here as if he were my dearest brother."

Here he ended and Gloster, having repeated the oath to the last word, considered that the ceremony was at an end. But Dud Rainey now turned to the silent witnesses, and propounded the same oath to them. And every man answered, slowly, solemnly, his eyes never leaving the face of Gloster for an instant, as if to drive every word deep in his mind. He watched Macarthur particularly, as the big chief was repeating after Rainey:

"If I have any old quarrel or grievance against this man, I shall bury it and never bring it to the light again."

Here Macarthur made such a long pause that the others had finished speaking the sentence before he began. His brow was as dark as thunder and his eyes flashing, yet speak it he did in a strained and halting voice which grew smoother with every word until at the end he gave an emphatic nod.

It was a solemn thing to Gloster. He himself had repeated the oath hardly knowing what he did. His mind had been too filled with other things—the strangeness of his situation, and the thought of Joan. But now he realized what he had done.

Even Joe Macarthur, malignant as a plague, had buried the hatchet, and he could not doubt that the big man was sincere to the bottom of his heart. So were all the others. Their gravity was written deep in their faces.

And now, last of all, Dud Rainey himself repeated the oath which he had been giving to the others. That faint smile which never left his lips was gone now. A frown gathered in his forehead. He removed his glasses as though there must be nothing artificial between his eyes and the eyes of Gloster. When he was ended, he shook hands. The others came up one by one and followed his example.

Macarthur was the last, and his grip lingered in that of Gloster for a long moment. Finally his hand fell, and Fatty Guinness broke the strain of the moment by saying:

"The hell of it is that when I'm taking that oath I always see myself already dead for the sake of the new gent. I feel like a funeral for two days."

"You seem to be tolerable alive under the fat," remarked Sliver Martin.

"I'll never die for you, blast you," Fatty retorted. The laughter went around, but not loudly, as the hand of Macarthur was raised and he cautioned them.

"We got to get out of the hollow without waking Joan, boys. We're going to be back here in the morning before she's more'n up and got her breakfast."

It caused the sweat to start from every pore of Gloster's body. They were to ride that very night, then! But, looking down to the floor so that none of them might read the horror in his eyes, he set

his teeth and decided that he would find a way of withdrawing before the actual scene of the crime to be was reached.

"Go out and saddle, one by one, boys, so's Joan won't hear," went on Macarthur. "Lead your hosses down through the gap and wait out there until we all are together, then we'll start."

They began to follow his commands while Macarthur drew Gloster to one side and explained to him in detail the plan for the robbery of the Wickson Bank. Two men at the most would be all that were needed to make an entry into the bank. But the other four would be posted at intervals here and there to guard against any possible danger. Now that Gloster was there, it meant that there were five extras.

"An easy job for you this time, Gloster," said Macarthur. "And you'll hook in on your full share of the coin. You ought to be more'n ten thousand dollars to the good before morning!"

Gloster nodded. After all, the thing could be managed. As Macarthur pointed out, this was an inside job and there would be virtually no risk attached to it.

He need not keep the stolen money which fell to his lot. He could simply leave it behind him at the camp when he departed. Or, better still, he could send it back to the Wickson Bank. He would have no actual share in the crime.

And when the good time came and he found that

mysterious murderer of Nichols and Springer, he could return to the ranks of law-abiding men with a reputation unstained. By that time, too, he should have found a way to convince Joan that she could not lead the wild life which she had chosen.

Macarthur broke in upon his thoughts. He had been watching carefully the rapt face of the new recruit.

"That's the way it always is," he said. "It's hard to take the plunge. But once you're in the water the swimming is fine. I'd a pile rather have a man that goes at the work slow and with regrets than a gent that makes a game of it right off from the start."

He beckoned Gloster to him, and going to the wall he took down a bridle.

"Gloster," he said, "what you find out in this here gang is kept secret. You know that?"

"I know that."

"It ain't to be used against any man. You've sworn to treat the worst of us like he was your best brother."

"I've sworn," said Gloster gloomily.

"Then, look at this."

He tossed the bridle to Gloster.

"What about it?" asked the latter.

"Look it over."

He obeyed, scrutinizing it carefully, but on the outside it was certainly the most ordinary of bridles in appearance. He looked on the inside, and at

the top of the headband, half obscured by an incrustation of horse sweat, he found the initials "H. S." cut into the leather.

"H. S.," he muttered to himself. "Who's that? H. S. Hal Springer!"

He jerked up his head.

"Good God!" he breathed.

Macarthur had folded his arms. But although he had to set his teeth to force himself to it, he managed to meet the eye of Gloster.

"Yep," he said. "I done that job."

"And tried to make me swing for it?"

"I'm a hard man, Gloster," said Macarthur, but a faint flush of shame had appeared in his cheeks. "I'd of let you swing and been glad of it. When one gent swings for a killing there ain't any look for another killer. But now you're one of us. I've swore solemn that I'd treat you like you was a brother of mine. And I'm telling you the truth."

Gloster groaned. There was such a mixture of astonishment and anger in his heart that he was breathing hard.

"I didn't go up there to do no harm to Nichols," Macarthur went on. "I was flat and I wanted to touch the old boy—but he seen through me, and that made me mad. There wouldn't have been no more than words, though, but when I got mad Nichols got scared and being scared he reached for his gun.

"Then hell broke loose. In a couple of seconds

I come back to my senses. And there they lay dead on the ground. I grabbed what was worth grabbing then, being flat, and beat it.

"Gloster, that's the whole yarn. It's the worst thing that I ever done. And the way I let 'em hound you for the job was worse still. But—I'd of let you go to the gallows right up to the time that you got to be one of us. Gloster, if you don't want to serve under me after hearing that, you're free to go where you want to go. If you'll stick with us in spite of that, there's my hand!"

For the split part of a second Harry Gloster fought his battle with himself. But after all, there was no choice. He was free to leave the band, to be sure, but if he left them it meant that he left Joan.

And, in another moment, he found himself shaking hands with the murderer of his two old partners!

CHAPTER XXXII

RIDERS IN THE NIGHT

THERE had been no truth in the supposition of Harry Gloster that Joan had gone back to her hut to sleep as soon as he left. Strange as she was, she had been profoundly stirred by the quiet and the dignity of her lover as he left her. And never had her new choice of a way in life seemed so hard to her as when she saw him striding away toward the defile.

Had he paused and turned back to her with a final appeal, she could not have resisted. She would have run to his arms and gone out with him to take his way in the world, no matter what it might have been.

But he went on steadily, with no sign of faltering, and when he had disappeared she was filled with a desperate sense of loneliness. Worst of all, she knew at once that the companionship of the men who were now sleeping in that big house near by could never make up to her for what she had lost in losing Harry Gloster.

She went to the Captain, and when she was still

fifty steps away he scented her coming and raced to meet her like a great happy dog when it sees its master. He threw a swift circle around her, then came to a pause in front of her with his head tossed up high in the air and his eyes shining.

They had a talk together after their own way. She whispered to him while she rubbed his nose, and he whinnied his reply no louder than her own hushed voice. Of him she asked her questions—where were they going? What would they see, and what would they do on the long trail which they were starting together? And then a gust of wind struck them and brought the stallion's head up, pointing north, and the cry of an owl blew vaguely and mournfully to them on the breeze.

That was the answer, as she had known even before she asked. They were bound north and north.

She went back to the hut, and there she sat cross-legged at the entrance like an Indian under the flap of his tent. So she saw Harry Gloster ride back in the hollow, saw him dismount in front of the cabin door, saw him stride inside.

Instantly she was up and after him, and from the outside she spied on everything that followed. She saw him holding Macarthur, and she noted with wonder and awe how impotent were the struggles of the chief in Gloster's grip. She heard the denunciation. She saw Harry Gloster tear from the earth his own "pebble" and cast the vote for

his admittance. She saw the crowd swept off its feet.

And then she understood what it was all about. He had asked to join simply that he might be near her. It could be for no other reason. They were fools if they looked into that frank and open face of his and did not see that he was not of their kind and never could be like them.

She herself could see it clearly enough, just as clearly as she knew that he could never have been guilty of the murder of the two old miners. And, being confident, she did not even ask to hear an explanation.

He had joined that crew in order that he might be near her. That was the meaning of his quiet air as he said good-by that night. It was not to her that he was saying farewell, but he was leaving his old life in order to enter a new one with her.

It touched her to the heart. She was on the verge of running in and warning him back from the step he was about to take. But she kept herself in check. She must not interfere now. Her care must be to remove herself from the hollow and ride off to the north so fast and so far that Harry Gloster could find no trace of her. And when he found that she had left the valley, she was confident that he would leave the band.

So, with that resolution, she watched until the oath had been taken so solemnly. Then she hurried away and found the Captain, led him by the mane

to her hut and, beyond the farther side of it where eyes from the larger house could not perceive her, she saddled and bridled him. It was not necessary to warn him to be silent and cautious of his movements. The great horse had fallen into the very spirit of the thing. Her stealthy approach and her whispering voice had been enough to make his steps as careful as those of a stalking cat.

She had saddled him and was ready to mount when she saw a man carrying a saddle go through the starlight into the pasture. She reined the black horse into a copse and there waited. She saw the fellow—it was the familiar bulging outlines of Fatty Guinness which she recognized—saddling his horse and then riding out of the hollow. He was no sooner gone than another man went out from the cabin, and then a third.

One by one they were capturing their mounts and departing from the hollow; and the meaning of it gradually came to her. This was the reason they had retired so early that night. There was a midnight ride ahead of them. And would Harry Gloster be one of the party?

The hope that he would not was hardly born when she saw two men, whose height and bulk showed them unmistakably to be Gloster and Macarthur, leave the door of the house and go out into the pasture. In another few moments, they were riding out of the valley. What was there that she could do?

She must simply wait until they were gone, of course. Then she could ride north as far as she pleased and before Harry Gloster and the rest came back to the mountains she would be far away beyond their ken. No horse of theirs could ever keep pace with the stallion once they were started!

She went out to the defile and looked north in the direction she must journey. But yonder the noise of seven horsemen was going down the mountainside, and all of her heart turned strongly after them. What was coming to Harry Gloster on this night of nights?

She had heard Buck Daniels describe a train robbery, at one time, and she had never forgotten the tale of how the great engine had been brought to a screeching halt at the turn, and how the robbers had rushed out from the place of concealment, and how one man went to help that member of the gang who had boarded the train at the last station, then worked himself forward over the roofs of the cars until he dropped down into the cab and with his gun at the head of the engineer had forced that poor fellow to stop the train at the appointed spot.

When the train was halted, some had gone to keep eyes and guns over the passengers and make them come out and stand in an orderly line beside the track that they might be most conveniently robbed. Others made the engineer flood the firebox, so that after the robbery the train could not rush

on to the next station, give the news and spread the alarm by telegraph through the mountains and start five hundred armed men swarming on the trail.

Then the gang had approached the mail car, the door had come open, and from within, two men with double barrelled shotguns began to pour out a withering fire—and when she came to that part of the picture it was Harry Gloster whom she saw receiving the bullets in his breast and falling on his face—there to lie in the mud until his body was kicked out of the way!

She drew a great breath. The North Star was as bright as ever, but for Joan, it had lost some of its power. If she could not prevent or help, at least, she could be a witness. And if they fled again, she might help them flee!

She turned the head of the Captain to follow, but as she did an eighth horseman started out of the woods just beneath her and began to wind slowly along the hillside. Was this some man of the law, trailing the band? She stared until her eyes ached, but she could make out nothing more than his shadowy outline. He disappeared into the trees, and she followed. She could not keep away, now!

From a hill top, she marked out the course which they must be taking. They were crossing the summit, and dipping down on the farther side, heading almost due west. She took a different course, so

that she might not be heard following them, and she sent the Captain in a wide detour to cut in ahead of them.

It was wonderful, indeed, to be on his back as he worked through the mountains by night. There was no need of sunlight for him, apparently. One might have thought that this was the trail to home which she had put him on. Through the trees and over the rocks he picked his steps, plunging down wild slopes which brought Joan's heart into her throat.

They came to the ravine which she had selected as being the one through which the riders must pass. And, ten minutes after the Captain had brought her there, she saw them pass.

They rode in single file on account of the broken nature of the ground with Macarthur, as his duty was, leading the way and making the trail. Behind him came the six, and last of all was the bulky form of Harry Gloster. She could almost have reached out from behind the tree which sheltered her and touched him!

They passed on, but still she did not ride out. For there was yet another man to be watched, and this was the one she had seen on the mountainside following the others. A full ten minutes she waited, and then he came, jogging his cow-pony steadily along, a man who wore his hat in a strangely familiar way, canted to one side. He passed, and his horse stumbled.

"Steady, boy!" muttered the rider, and rode on.

But he left Joan stunned behind him, for she had heard and recognized the voice of Buck Daniels.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A FATAL MISCHANCE

SAMUEL CARNEY was enough of a Christian to believe in the efficacy of forgiveness of sins, but if he had had any doubt it would have been removed on this day. Even a sense of shame had left him. He was filled with a mild peace and feeling of purification.

But the vision which occupied his mind substituted, in place of the unseen visage of the Almighty Father, the fat and rosy face of Oscar Fern. The devotion which he felt for the good natured banker and millionaire was a cross between the devotion of a soldier for his captain and of a son for his father.

New lights also had been breaking in upon him. As he reviewed his labors for the bank he decided that there might be at least a shadow of doubt as to whether he had been absolutely essential to the welfare of the institution. He mused, also, upon the often repeated remarks concerning the stupidity and luck of Oscar Fern.

Here, after all, had been another one of Oscar's

pieces of luck. He had saved the bank and himself a loss of a hundred thousand dollars, buckled to his side the services of his cashier who was faltering from the straight and narrow path, and avoided a scandal which would have shocked the community to its core.

It could be called luck, to be sure, but it seemed to Sam Carney that there was another name for it. One might call it instinct, say. At least, there was no doubt that that kind and shallow eye could sometimes look deep, deep beneath the surface. If he had not seen Carney's mind, at least he had seen his suffering.

It was a strangely humbled Samuel Carney, therefore, who prepared for the work which lay ahead of him that night. It was not pleasant work. It meant that he must ride after dark out of the valley and into the foothills to the deserted shack on the old Tompson ranch.

And Sam Carney was not at all fond of riding. He spent his days at his desk, his evenings at his newspaper and his books, and the nights puzzling over business problems and fighting for sleep. A spin through the fresh open air was an unknown novelty to him. But it was necessary this evening.

Men were coming down from the mountains into a death trap which, they had been assured by his own lips, would not exist. He must warn them off. Therefore, he saddled his horse and rode away as soon as the darkness fell.

On the way he thought over what he should say to Joe Macarthur. That was not to be a pleasant interview. He could hear the curses and see the black looks in prospect. But all of this must be ventured.

He had in his pockets five hundred dollars in cold cash. That might help to soothe the wounded feelings of the outlaw and pay him for the wasted ride of the night. If it would not do, he could not help it.

One fierce ten minutes of conversation, and then the affair would be off his shoulders forever, and he could go on to face the prospect of a happy and peaceful life to the end of his days, music for his daughter, health for his wife, and the undying love and faith of his employer! Tears rose to his eyes at the thought of Oscar Fern, and when the lump melted away from his throat, he swore aloud that the rest of his life should be spent in the service of the banker.

His spirits, naturally enough, began to rise. And the ride was not so uncomfortable as he had expected. He had his daughter's favorite saddle horse beneath him, and the wise footed old gelding moved along with a gait as comfortably smooth as flowing water. He picked his way with an unerring skill over the easy road and the rough.

It was a two-hour ride to the Thompson place. He would reach it long before the outlaws arrived. But, no matter for that, he must be there in plenty

of time. Otherwise there was a chance that the gang might get by him and go on to the trap. For he had agreed with Macarthur, in their final understanding, that if he were not at the Tompson shack when the troop arrived, it might be understood by the robbers that all was well and that the plans went forward without interruption.

That all was well! He shuddered as he thought of the precautions of Oscar Fern. Not before that day had he suspected that there was such a bloodthirsty fighting strain in the banker. But Fern had thrown himself into the game with the enthusiasm of a boy.

Twenty men had been employed. They were not casually picked up about the town, but here and there through the valley Fern had sent his couriers. They had gone to call on old ranchers who had been in the Wickson Valley in the days when the cow business was the only business—men who had lived with saddle and gun and who had forgotten the use of neither.

They called also upon young fellows who were ardent hunters and who were noted for their skill with weapons. And, as the afternoon wore on toward evening, one by one they had come to call on the president, all flattered by the summons to visit the rich man unless, as was the case with not a few of them, they had mortgages on which interest was overdue. They had been brought into

his private office, and there they had received their instructions, with Samuel Carney present.

That was Oscar's way of printing on the mind of every one of his men the fact that Carney represented the power of the bank. And although Carney appreciated that fact, it was a gruesome affair to him.

He heard Fern tell each man that a "tip" had come to him from a source which could not be revealed, that the bank was to be robbed that night. There was, indeed, just a possibility that the robbers might become suspicious and not attempt to push through the work. But there was at least one chance in three that they would make the effort.

And he wanted a strong reception committee in waiting in case that attempt were made. Therefore he had picked out the best men in the valley to fight the fight. For one thing, they would confer a great obligation on him; again, they were upholding the law; and yet again, they should all be liberally paid for the night's work—or waiting—if they would accept his money.

Money, however, was not what they wanted. Carney saw their eyes light at the prospect of battle, and grim a fighter as Joe Macarthur was, he knew that there would be more than he could do to meet such warriors as these.

No, the entire gang would go down full of lead unless they were forewarned. And, since some of

them were sure to be wounded and not killed outright, before they died they were certain to give the name of the cashier who had first promised to betray the bank and had then betrayed his tools.

And this would as effectually ruin the reputation of Sam Carney as if he himself had been caught in an act of theft. Such were the reflections which filled his mind as he made his way toward the Tompson shack. And they so excited him that he began to push the horse forward relentlessly. But when he reached the shack, there was no sign of any one near it.

He lighted matches, and by their light he examined the ground around the shack. All the hoof-marks were old which had traveled that trail which had once been a comfortable wagon road. No party of hard riders had gone by that way this night.

He sat down at the door of the old cabin and began his vigil. But it was a lonely place to keep watch. Every murmur of the wind through the thousand cracks and broken roof of the shack sounded like a secret whispering of voices behind him.

Besides, he must not be found by any chance wanderer sitting in front of this deserted cabin. It would make a strange story to be told in the town the next day. And Carney was in no situation to have stories about clandestine meetings spread abroad.

He changed his place. There was a cluster of saplings, growing thick, about fifty yards from the house. It was on rising ground, and in the starlight he could sweep all the approaches to the cabin with his eyes. To these saplings he removed himself, tethered the horse in the midst of the trees, and began the wait.

He consulted his watch. It was still early in the night, and the robbers were not apt to reach the cabin before two in the morning, at the earliest. The ground was hard, so he broke off a few brittle boughs to make a comfortable seat. There he rested with his back against the trunk of a tree.

It was a pleasant place and a pleasant night. The hills rolled gently toward the east and south, and behind them shot up the stern mountains. He had never liked the mountains. He always connected them with sweat and burning sunshine or cold nights and hunger. In the winter when snow collected on the summits, he was fond of looking up from the valley on the white caps, and then he would rub his hands and congratulate himself on the life of sheltered comfort which he lived.

But this evening the air was soft, the stars were bright, and the song of a far off coyote gave a weird and thrillingly romantic touch to the moment. The mountains, too, now that he was so close to their feet, were more imposing than ever, but there was a more beautiful majesty about them. He decided that he must unmake his mind about many

things, and, just as he had discovered a new point of view about Oscar Fern, he must look again upon all of his old preconceptions.

And so, with these mild thoughts, he was lulled fast asleep! He wakened again, with his heart pounding, and a wild sense of alarm in his brain. He looked about him. All was unchanged. Except that the stars were dimmer, the mountains more easily visible—yes, there was an old moon standing in the eastern sky!

He whipped out his watch. The first match broke in his trembling fingers. But the second gave a light by which he saw that it was three o'clock! He stood up still and straight, with a stifled cry. He had slept at his post and they had gone by him.

"God help me—and them!" moaned Carney, and ran out into the trail.

There, on his knees, he lighted more matches. And instantly he saw the hoofprints. It looked to his inexperienced eyes as if twice ten horses had passed. He turned down the road. There was nothing in sight. The moon haze closed together not so far away.

He raced back to his waiting horse, loosed the rope, flung himself into the saddle, and spurred with might and main for the town. He had an hour—if they did not begin their work until four. A whole hour. And that was enough to reach the town if the horse held out!

Low over the neck of the gelding he bent as he had seen riders in pictures leaning over racers, and the good old bay bent to his work with all the strength in his body and his heart.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE VENGEFUL BULLETS

THEY had made the trip down from the mountains perhaps half an hour before their schedule time, so well had the horses done their work and so eager were the riders to get to the town. The clearness of the light from even that old moon which hung in the sky had worried them a little as they came down the valley, but before they reached the town of Wickson the high blown haze of clouds had passed across the surface of the moon and made it as dim as a sickle of tarnished tin. Under these favorable auspices they reached the town itself.

Sweeping in a half circle around it ran the river which had furnished the wealth to the valley, now a dull and muddy trickle in a shallow basin, for most of the current had been drawn off higher up the course to water the fields. The hoofs of the horses sounded hollow on the bridge and then they entered the long main street.

Wickson was soundly asleep. At least, there was not a light shining in a single window and the houses watched them go by with blank faces.

At the first corner they separated, as the previous agreement had been. Gloster and Macarthur rode on up the main street, the others turned to the sides. They were to circle around the block and come in again to wait near the bank itself in case of an alarm.

All was so carefully arranged that there appeared slight danger of any interruption, and yet the heart of Harry Gloster was hammering as he went on with the leader. Not a word passed between them, however. They left their horses behind the bank and passed around to the front. The key which the cashier had furnished to Macarthur fitted the door. It opened to them, and they stepped into the black interior.

All was perfectly still, except that the wind which entered with them rattled a paper somewhere in the distance. But when the door was closed behind them, there was a perfect quiet.

With his electric pocket torch Macarthur cast a swift ray of light around the place, so swift indeed that Gloster saw nothing but a blur of many outlines, but to the leader all seemed to be as clear as day, for he went on now, with a perfect assurance, and after Gloster had stumbled over a chair he fell in behind Macarthur.

They found their way straight to the safe, on which Macarthur flashed the light, partly hooding it with his hand, so that only a dim radiance fell on the combination. He took a slip of paper from

his pocket and as he read the numbers Gloster worked the combination, and as he worked it his heart sank within him.

Once, indeed, his numbed fingers refused to stir the disk and he was about to stand up and confess that he could go no further. But if he did that, he was erecting a wall between himself and the chance of seeing Joan again. So he kept on until, with a faint click, the heavy door yawned slowly wide before them.

There was little time for conscience to work then. In a moment Macarthur had unlocked the drawer which Carney had previously designated. It was a deep compartment, and from it he drew out small packages done up in strong paper. Half of them he gave to Gloster. The other half he stuffed in his own pockets.

"This here job," he said with a grin finally, "is what you might call getting the stuff de luxe, eh?"

"Not so loud!" gasped Gloster.

Macarthur raised his eyes quickly.

"You look as white as a sick kid," he commented.

"Kind of weak in the stomach, Harry?"

The latter shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't let that worry you none," Macarthur went on. "That's the way with the best of us the first time out. It sure bites in on a fellow his first trip. But the second is easy as pie. That's always the way. Let's have a look at that stuff."

"For God's sake!" breathed Gloster. "Are you going to waste time *now?*"

Macarthur chuckled, and his voice sounded deep and strong in the room.

"There ain't no danger," he declared. "This is a cinch for us, Gloster. The old town is sound asleep. I can almost hear 'em snoring. Can't you?"

Gloster set his teeth. Since it had to be endured, he could at least compel himself to be calm.

In the meantime, the leader had torn loose one of the wrappers which secured the packages, and it exposed within a thick little sheaf of greenbacks. They were stiff with newness, and as he ran his fingers over the edge of the pack they rattled like playing cards.

"Only twenties in this lot," murmured Macarthur.

He added suddenly: "What the devil is this?" And with that he tore the money from its sheath. He stared at it for a long moment and then let it flutter in a green cloud to the floor.

"What's wrong?" Gloster asked.

"By God," Macarthur muttered to himself, "I didn't think that the little shriveled up shrimp would have the nerve to try it on me!"

"Try what?"

"Shut up with your fool questions," Macarthur responded. Then he added, between his teeth: "It's queer. All queer—"

He snatched another package from his pocket, tore off the wrapper, and gave the contents a hasty scrutiny. This he dashed to the floor with an oath.

"Counterfeit—stage money," he groaned. "I'll turn Carney into a sieve for this, and the fool ought to have known it!"

"Good God!" murmured Gloster. "Then they double-crossed you?"

"He has!"

"That means they're watching for us to-night."

"It does," answered the leader.

"Then—for God's sake, hurry, Joe! We'll have to ride for our lives."

"Damn our lives," said Macarthur. "We've lost a fortune to-night."

And he shook his fist at the safe as if that senseless mass of toolproof steel were to blame.

Next, however, he drew his revolver and held it in a stiff clutch. He gestured to Gloster to do the same. And as he made the motion, there was the soft but unmistakable sound of a door being closed somewhere near them.

All the strength passed out of Gloster's big limbs and left him shaking. It appeared to him that the sound of that closing door was the sound of the prison gate clanging loudly upon him, and the voice of the hangman at his ear.

Even Macarthur had started. Now he switched off his light.

"Fire at anything that moves!" he cautioned, and led the way back, stealing with wonderful skill among the desks and chairs.

But Gloster did not draw his gun. If there was fighting to do, he would use his hands to the best of his ability, if only the blood would run back into the muscles of his arms again. But he would not take a life—

They had come to the outer corridor when half a dozen shadows sprang up before them, soft and confused objects against the light colored wall, and the gun of Macarthur exploded.

The flash showed Gloster, for the smallest glimpse, six resolute faces, six gleaming guns. The reply was a blasting volley which would have torn them to pieces had it gone home, but, at the instant of Macarthur's shot, the two big men dropped for the floor, Macarthur as a clever maneuver, and Gloster because his shaking legs refused to bear him up.

"Take 'em alive!" yelled a voice.

The six plunged at them. A knee struck Gloster on the ribs, another grazed his head, and half a dozen hands tore at him, striving for a grip.

That contact of flesh against flesh sent the blood shooting hot through his veins once more. He heaved himself up. His assailants spilled off him, then grappled close, but not close enough.

Near him he saw Macarthur struggling with the men who had fallen upon him, and while the assail-

ants were slight, Macarthur was cursing in a steady stream, although softly, as if even now he were striving to keep from alarming the town—as if that thundering volley whose sound still made Gloster's ears ache had not aroused every one within a mile of them.

But in the meantime he had one arm and hand free—a hand which could be balled into a lump as hard and as effective as the jagged head of a club. One man had his arms around his waist, driving him back against the steel fence behind him.

He struck that fellow above the ear, and he went down limply. A swinging hook brought down the next. The third leaped back with a cry of alarm from this fighter of such unhuman strength and swung up his gun.

It was of no use to him. Unseen ruin sped at him through the darkness. There was only a flash of the fist before his eyes as it struck. Down he went, toppling head over heels, and firing his bullet into the ceiling.

Then Gloster turned to Macarthur. The latter was big enough to have handled two men, but there were three of them, and each a sturdy fellow. He was down on the floor, his curses were stifled as his face was bashed against the concrete.

Gloster picked off one man as he might have picked an apple from the ground. He dashed him face down on the floor. The victim lay without a quiver.

He leaned and crashed his swinging fist into the back of another's neck. The third he tied into a knot and cast away. Then he jerked Macarthur to his feet.

"Damn them!" gasped Joe, by way of thanks. "Now fast work, Harry!"

He plunged for the door with Gloster at his heels. They smashed against it. It had been locked from the inside and the key was removed. But now a bullet smashed a pane of plate glass and showed them the best way out. In the street there was a steady fusillade and a rising roar of voices. They beat out the rest of the glass with the butts of their guns and scrambled forth.

They could see well enough, and everywhere they looked was ruin. At their feet before the door, sprawled on his back with his arms thrown wide, lay big Lew Cambridge. His face was unmistakable. He had come loyally to the defense of his leader and companion when the crisis came. So, too, had Sliver Martin, whose lean body was now crouched near by taking vain shelter behind a concrete hitching post while he emptied his revolver at the windows of the near-by houses.

And every one of those windows, so it seemed, was filled with fighters who had waited prepared for the signal for battle. Against the blackness of the interiors of the rooms were fire-fly glows as rifles and revolvers spoke. The doors of the bank were a ruin from the concentrated fire which had

been centered there. Now Sliver dropped to his side with one gasp and did not stir.

Fatty Guinness and Dud Rainey rushed up the street, bringing a whole group of led horses.

"Joe! Joe!" cried Fatty. "For the love of Heaven, Joe and Harry, where are you?"

There was heroism worthy of any battlefield. No gallant soldier who ran out from the trenches to carry in a wounded comrade better deserved a decoration than Fatty and Rainey. But the reward which Fatty collected at once was a bullet through the head which drove him headlong to the ground. One of the horses squealed with pain as a bullet raked across its back, and the whole group bolted, saving only Rainey on his own horse.

He was out of the saddle, now, and across the street came Babe Cooney. He had stood off making a separate point of diversion. But now he came to join the others at their Waterloo only to receive a bullet from behind that dropped him on his face in the dust.

And all of this in the space of three seconds as Macarthur and Gloster clambered through the broken door!

CHAPTER XXXV

THE STURDY MEN OF WICKSON

CERTAINLY Oscar Fern had chosen his men well! Never had there been straighter shooting, although indeed that mass of lead which was sweeping toward the bank was sure to wash down any life that might be in its way.

"Around the corner!" cried Macarthur, and they darted away.

They were out of the main focus of the bullets, to be sure. People could no longer shoot at them from three corners. But right across the street were five men kneeling, each with a magazine rifle from which they were pumping a stream of lead. The windows on that side of the bank began to go out with a crash, and Macarthur, with a gasp, dropped to his knees.

Two unwounded bandits remained, and of these only Rainey had a weapon in his hand. He fired at that kneeling row of marksmen. The center figure dropped. The four remaining fled to a place of safety and the wounded man crawled after them.

But, still, where could the fugitives go? There was only one horse for the two unhurt men and

for one wounded—and this was Rainey's gal-lant pony, which had trotted around the corner to join him. There was only one horse for three men, and the whole town, as could be told by far off shooting, was rising.

And then it was that they saw two horses racing down the main street—Fern's men had chosen to charge home, then?

No, for the voice of one rider was shouting: "Gloster! Harry Gloster!"

And he recognized Buck Daniels, with an answering shout of joy. Yet Daniels did not reach them first. From behind him shot a great black horse with a slim figure in the saddle—a giant of a horse which came sliding to a halt before them in a cloud of stinging dust.

"Harry!" cried Joan. "Harry, are you here?"

He had no time to feel horror that she should be there.

"He'll carry two—swing up behind—quick!"

But there, gasping in the dirt beside him, was Joe Macarthur, to whom he had sworn, looking into his eyes, that he would be faithful. He scooped the heavy body up in his arms, ran forward, and tossed Macarthur across the pommel of the saddle.

What was that which Macarthur had groaned as he lifted him? "Save yourself, Harry. I'm done!"

"Down the street, Joan," Gloster shouted, "as fast as the horse will run!"

"I can't leave you!"

"For God's sake, Joan!"

Buck Daniels had drawn up beside them and behind his saddle had leaped Dud Rainey. They moved off down the street with Gloster racing between the two horses, and behind them was a new roar of guns and a shout of rage.

They were out of one trap, indeed, but they were already in the jaws of another. Straight before them a dozen men ran out into the street and threw themselves on their bellies. In another instant the bullets were whistling.

There was no facing that fire. Aiming by starlight, and shaken with excitement, the prone men were missing, to be sure, but they were finding their range. In a moment they would begin to plant their shots.

Down the street there was a confusion of yells as men were mounting horses which had been kept carefully concealed in back yards of the houses. Now they rushed for the pursuit. Ahead and behind, then, their way was totally blocked.

Buck Daniels, pushing to the lead, turned them into a new direction. The double doors of a livery stable yawned wide to their right. A single lantern burned dimly in the interior. They might sweep through this place and gain an exit to the open country behind. Even that, however, would not avail them long, with only two horses for five persons. But in the stable itself they might be able to get new mounts.

So, with a roar of hoof-beats, they dashed into the old building. Some one rushed for cover, throwing away a rifle in his haste, but Dud Rainey dived from the horse of Buck Daniels and caught the fellow with a flying tackle. Down they went with a crash.

By the time they had risen, the others had halted their horses, Joe Macarthur lay stretched on the floor where Harry Gloster had laid him gently, and Joan, dropping from the saddle on the lofty Captain, was kneeling at the side of the wounded man.

In the meantime, with a yell of exultation, the crowd in the street poured around the stable. On either side and to the rear they ran, firing into the air in blind joy, and it was plain that they felt that the group was trapped. Half a dozen ran for the open double doors themselves, but Buck Daniels ripped up the floor with a few bullets at their feet and drove them helter-skelter back.

There was still something to be done before they took the building from the rear. Harry Gloster sped to the rear entrance, and from the single door, fired blindly, half a dozen times, at skulking figures. The reply was a rain of bullets, and one or two yells of alarm, but the skulkers disappeared behind cover and it might be taken for granted that they would not soon try to approach the stable from that direction.

So Gloster returned to the corner in which the

others had gathered and where little Dud Rainey had his captive by the collar. The latter was a much larger man, but his spirit was completely cowed. Fear of death filled up his eyes, which were starting from their sockets.

The first care was for the wounded man. He had been shot through the body and he was bleeding fast. Buck Daniels made a brief examination and reported that only a good doctor could give help to the injured outlaw. But how could they bring a doctor in to him?

From the shadow behind the door, Harry Gloster called to the crowd:

"Is the sheriff out there?"

"We don't need a sheriff," thundered some one, "to handle a lot of hounds like you! We'll give you a bellyful before we're done with it."

There was a loud roar of applause which was taken up with a cheer from the distance, for men were gathering rapidly from every part of the town toward the sound of the firing.

"Is there anybody out there in command," thundered Gloster again.

"They've got enough. They'd rather hang than get their medicine now," came the answer. "Send for President Fern. He'll do the talking in good shape."

Fern's voice came across the street. And it was not raised high, yet it pierced through the tumult easily and reduced the others to silence at once.

"If you want to surrender," he said, "I'll see that you are brought safely to the jail. Is that what you want to know?"

"We've got a man badly hurt in here," Gloster replied. "If we bring him to the door, will some of you carry him to the doctor?"

"And get our heads blowed off when we come for him?" taunted some one. "We wasn't born yesterday, old son!"

"What's our guarantee that you'll play fair and square?" asked Fern.

"I'll bring him out and stand beside him," answered Gloster. "Will that be a guarantee? If anybody goes down, I'll be the man."

"That's fair and reasonable," said Fern. "We'll deal fairly by you, my brave fellow! Bring him out."

Gloster went back to the others, but he found that there was a decided difference of opinion. What he had said had been heard, of course, by his companions in the stable.

Joan, working with flying hands to bandage Macarthur, said nothing, but she raised her head and gave him a look that he could never forget. How he should interpret it he could not tell, but it seemed to him that her eyes overflowed with her joy of him. But Daniels and Dud Rainey were strongly against the risk.

"Somebody will take a chance and dump a shot at you," said Rainey. "Besides, there isn't a chance

for poor Macarthur. When a man gets a bullet where he got one, it's all over."

Daniels nodded agreement, and Joe Macarthur himself groaned from the floor, "You've done noble by me already, Harry. God knows that you ain't had any call to be so square. Let me die here quiet. It'd ease me a pile more than thinking of being hung if I should get well."

They might as well have talked to the wind. Gloster leaned over the injured man, gathered him in his arms, and brushing through the others as if they had been no more than stubble, walked to the open door and through it. He marched on to the center of the street. There he paused.

"I've got a man that may be dying," he said. "If there's anybody yonder with a drop of mercy in him, come out and take him to a doctor."

There was no answer. That yawning door behind Gloster was like the open mouth of a cannon. Presently Oscar Fern shouted: "I'm coming, friend Boys, won't one of you help me carry him in?"

He started running across the street. That appeal was too much for the manhood of the citizens of Wickson, and a round dozen followed. They swept around Gloster.

"We've got him!" said one of the last comers. "Why not take him back along with his wounded man?"

"There'll be none of that!" announced the authoritative voice of Oscar Fern. "By no means! I've

never seen a braver thing than this in my life, and not a hand is going to be raised against this man!"

Two or three of his companions took the heavy body of Macarthur into their arms, and the outlaw groaned with the agony of their touch.

"Gently!" cautioned Fern. "Dr. Sand will take a hand with him—and do his best! And you, my friend, what's your name?"

"Gloster," he answered.

That name brought a growl from the bystanders. It was too much to ask that they should be allowed to permit that notorious murderer to escape even for the moment. But the admiration of Fern appeared hardly shaken.

"Gloster," he said, "no matter what there may be in your record, this is a fine thing. And—I wish you luck, lad, and better habits. If we take you alive out of that building, you'll find a friend in me!"

Gloster thanked him briefly. He stepped to Macarthur as the latter was being carried away.

"Joe," he said, "good luck—fight it through!"

"God bless you, Harry," gasped the wounded man. "But I'll see hell before you do. I'm fixed."

So Harry Gloster turned away and walked slowly back across the street to the door of the stable. Not a shot was fired behind him and that, after all, was a fine tribute to the sturdy men of Wickson.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A STRATAGEM OF DESPERATION

HE found Buck Daniels and Dud Rainey in close conversation when he rejoined the group. As for Joan, she had withdrawn into the background, where she kept the Captain quiet with her hand against his neck. His head was turning constantly from side to side, and his eyes flashed as though he realized the full significance of the scene through which he had just galloped, but he did not stir from his place.

Rainey was trying to persuade Daniels that it was foolish for him to throw in his destiny with theirs when he had taken no part in the attempt on the bank, but it was not hard for Buck to prove to Dud that he was wrong. There would be a mob trial and mob justice for every unwounded man taken from the stable that night.

They would not wait to ask questions and learn the truth, but like a pack of hounds which has been lately blooded, they would be eager for another kill. There was no real reply to such a statement, and Rainey fell silent.

They turned back to their captive, whose fear had a little abated. They demanded to know the two best horses in the stable. He took them at once to the stalls. The prosperity of the town of Wickson was amply attested by the condition of its leading livery stable. For there were fully thirty animals in the stalls and most of them were excellent mounts.

There was no need for him to point out the best of the lot. A tall, wide shouldered roan, apparently capable of bearing even the bulk of Harry Gloster, and a slender limbed little brown mare stood out head and shoulders above the rest. They saddled these and brought them back in silence. For it was plain that they had only one chance, and that chance was really a delusion. They must attempt to break out through the front or the rear entrance to the stable and ride to liberty.

It was, indeed, worse than hopeless, for the street in front of the stable was lined with fine marksmen, all grouped within easy range of the door of the stable. Rainey went to the rear of the building to explore and came back with a report that the roof of every shed near the stable was thick with armed men. Whether they tried the front or the rear exit, there was sure to be a flood of lead poured at them.

It was agreed that the best thing for Joan was to leave her behind in the stable. After the attempt to escape, when the crowd invaded the stable itself they would find her and let her go. Nothing else could be done with a woman by Westerners. And

one glance at her would be sufficient to convince even the harshest of the mob that she was not an Amazon.

It was Rainey who thought of the stratagem which gave them at least a ghost of a hope.

"What's the worst mark in the world to shoot at?" he asked.

None of the others could answer.

"What about a gang of horses stampeding?"

They nodded. Any man who had seen a mob of horses running wild, their heads packed full of fear, dashing on with a mad impetus which would carry them with equal recklessness into a fence or over a cliff, would have to agree that it was almost impossible to pick out one mark in the midst of the swirling, racing bodies.

"But what's that got to do with us?" asked Glosster.

"There's two horses here we have to ride," answered Rainey. "But there are twenty-eight more, and twenty-eight will make a pretty imitation of a stampede. Suppose we get them ready, put our horses in the middle, and then let go their halter ropes and give a yell? They'll be ready for fast work. Listen to them now."

For the stable was in a growing turmoil. In every stall there was a fretting horse. They had smelled powder smoke. They had glimpsed, here and there through the cracks in the wall, the flashing of guns outside. And, above all, they had heard the battle

shouts of men, which drive all animals into a frenzy of fear and excitement.

It was done at once. They led out the stamping, rearing, snorting horses and gathered them four abreast in the driveway of the stable. Their lead ropes were tied together, which would keep them from scattering. In seven ranks they were ranged. In the center the riders would take their station and move with the mass, although at the imminent danger of having themselves bumped out of the saddles.

There was only one thing left, and that was to say good-by to Joan. She had not stirred or spoken since she took up her place at the side of the great black horse. Buck Daniels came to her first.

"Joan," he said, "to-night will show you what a free life means. This is the sort of thing that it runs into. When a gent tries to run free and take his own way, he runs into hell early. There's only one smooth way of traveling, and that's to keep with the herd, the way they go. I ain't saying this with the hope of changing your mind, but give it a think, Joan. There's something in it!"

She had listened impassively, her wide eyes fixed upon his face.

"It was all for my sake," she said at last. "There would have been none of this if I hadn't left. And, oh—dad—"

She paused there on that old word, and it shook Buck Daniels as if she had been a man and struck him heavily.

"Don't say that, honey," he answered gently. "No matter what comes out of this break to get away, it don't make much difference to me. You see, Joan, I been tired of living for a considerable stretch now. It took something out of me when Dan Barry died. It took a pile more when Kate followed him. After that I was sort of living on the inside of a lie. And that don't do a man no good.

"Sometimes, in the old days, when you called me 'dad,' it used to make things worth while. But I knew that before the end came, I had to tell you the truth. And that took the salt out of life. Now I come to the final round-up—and I'm glad of it!"

She bowed her head.

"Say so-long to me, Joan. And say it with a smile. I'm aching to see you smile, dear."

"If I could live it over again!" she breathed fiercely. "Oh, if I had another chance, I'd make you happy, dad, if it took the last drop of blood in my body!"

"Things can't be changed, Joan," he said. "What happens is what's planned. The older I get, the more I see it. There was a time when I loved Kate Cumberland and had a hope that I might make her love me some day. That day never came. There was a time when I tried to kill Dan Barry.

"But when the wind-up comes, what have I been? Just a tool, Joan. Something else took hold of me and used me to work for Dan and Kate and then used me to work for you. I ain't regretting. But

that's been my life. And you'll do the same way—not what you try to make out of yourself, but what's been planned for you away back in the beginning. Good-by, dear."

Somehow, she was able to raise her fallen head, she was able to smile into his face, and then he was gone. She saw Dud Rainey before her.

"Wish me *bon voyage*," he said cheerfully.

"Good luck! Good luck!" she whispered. She caught one of his hands. "Nothing can happen to you. I know it—I know it!"

He laughed and stepped away. And there was the towering form of Harry Gloster. His face was in shadow. But she knew that it was working, and that words were forming in his throat and never reaching his lips. Then he was gone after the others, in silence.

She tried to cry out to stop him, but she could not speak. She tried to run after him, but her feet were weighed down with lead. And with all her mind and heart turned to ice, she watched the final preparations.

They went about their work calmly, methodically, as men should do. There was no delay, no trembling, no vain regrets. The three saddle horses were brought into the center of the group of stable animals. Then Dud Rainey, with a gun in either hand, went to the back of the stable, and they heard him kick open a door and begin to blaze away into the outer night.

There was an answering roar of guns which quite drowned his. Then came a yelling of a hundred men, swarming back to meet the rear attack. That was the moment for which they had waited.

Rainey came racing back and leaped into his saddle. And all three, yelling like wild Indians, turned the stable horses loose. Out they thundered! The din of their hoofs turned the stable into pandemonium, and from the street came the blaze of revolvers and rifles.

Yet it was not a third of the volume which it would have been a little before. Many a score of good men had run toward the back of the stable when it appeared that the attempt would be made in that direction. Those who remained were enough to have riddled ten times as many fugitives with bullets.

But they had no fair mark. Out from the stable rushed a mass of horses, their heads stretched out with the fury of their speed. And it was hard indeed to mark the ones which actually carried riders on their backs, for those riders were flattened across the pommels of their saddles, showing almost nothing to the eye.

Men who stood on the level of the street could do nothing. Only those who were posted in the windows had a half chance, and these, although they turned loose a plunging fire, were shooting wildly. They had expected, at the most, four horses. Here was a herd of wild animals plunging down the street.

And, indeed, it seemed to the excited imagination of more than one man that there was a rider on the back of every animal—and that the four had been transformed by black magic into a host.

There was no time for a second thought. That stream of horseflesh swept to the left as it shot out of the stable door and it whipped away like a thrown javelin. All in a moment, there remained only a cloud of dust which made rifle work like shooting in a fog and which stung the eyes and the nostrils.

From every crevice, with wails of fury and rage, they ran into the street. They turned a storm of lead down the street, but it is an old maxim that one good marksman can often do more damage than a score of hysterical fighters.

Not a single man was ready to whirl and fire in a new direction when, from the door of the stable, another figure started forth on an immense black horse, plunged through them, and raced away down the street with a form no larger than the form of a boy flattened along his back.

CHAPTER XXXVII

COMPASSIONATE SHADOWS

THE room in which Joe Macarthur lay was filled with silence and the stir of great shadows. Not very far away townsmen were besieging the companions of the robber, and although they would have had their guns ready to kill in a moment had he himself been able to stand and fight, yet now they were all subdued.

For Joe Macarthur was dying. So the doctor had pronounced, rising from his examination while his shadow rose on the wall beyond him, black, shapeless and immense.

There was only one source of light in the room, and that was a single lamp which stood on a center table. It had been held close so that the doctor could see his work until he gave a signal with a brusque gesture that he was through, or at least that he had seen all that he needed to see. Then the lamp was replaced on the table. And it cast just enough light to print black silhouettes which were as ugly as caricatures on the walls behind the watchers.

Perhaps a dozen men stood in the room. Not that

they were shirkers who were unwilling to take their part in any fighting which might go on around the stable where the others were besieged. On the contrary, most of these were old hands—men who had been in brawls before and knew all about the kick of a revolver against the heel of the hand and the hum of other bullets past one's own head. They had seen such things in plenty and the raw edge of the novelty had been worn off for them.

They left younger men, therefore, men who had not yet proved themselves, to press around the stable, hungry as wolves to hear the singing of bullets and fight to kill. For their own part, they knew that there was more of real importance apt to go on within this quiet chamber where the wounded chieftain was lying, so they had followed those who bore him there.

It was a grocery store. Along the shelves the tinned food glittered like a thousand small, dull eyes. Glass cases shone faintly, also. The smell of onions and the earthy odor of potatoes and a peculiar pungency of molasses was in the air. As for the couch of Joe Macarthur, it was a saddle blanket spread upon the top of the low, broad counter over which sugar and flour were wrapped and passed.

The doctor was a busy little man. He had an ungracious personality, and would have starved in a new community. But he had grown up in Wickson, and therefore his peculiarities were taken for granted

As a matter of fact, he was a dull fellow. But his waspish temper gave him an air that passed for acuteness among the townsfolk. He had no sympathy with pain and sorrow, but his cold eye and his compressed lips were taken as a sign of devotion to his science, and they were forgiven for that reason. He now stood beside Macarthur and looked down into the steady but fast fading eyes of the robber.

"What d'you want?" he asked.

"Eh?" murmured Macarthur.

"What is there that you want?"

Macarthur closed his eyes. His lips twitched. But when he looked up again his face was once more calm.

"I'm as far gone as that, eh?"

"You're far gone, Macarthur," snapped the doctor. "So if you want anything, shout for it now. Whisky?"

His brutality did not bother Macarthur. The latter had been brutal in turn, many a time. He was willing to take all the bitter dose of medicine and drain it to the last drop, but he raised his right hand to stop the flow of words.

"How long have I got?" he asked.

"Maybe five minutes."

"No more'n that?"

"I'm a doctor, not a prophet. You might last out an hour, I suppose. But now I've done my duty and I guess I'm through."

He turned a hasty glance over the assemblage. Not a man had stirred. During the time of his examination there had not been a whisper in the store. But there they stood in stiff attitudes.

And when they heard his judgment, some one removed his hat. The others followed the example, and all unconsciously. No matter where and how Macarthur had sinned, he was swiftly passing toward a place where they were all bound. There were no young men there, and death is most terrible to the young. But even these hardened fellows were impressed by the sudden snuffing out of so much power of hand and brain as that which now lay stretched upon the counter.

"If I have only five minutes—it'll do. I've got something to say. Has anybody got a pencil and some paper?"

It caused a stir. A dozen hands shifted into pockets. Papers and many pencils were produced.

"Carney—you're the man for this. You understand these things better'n the rest of us."

So designated, and urged forward by hands on either side, Samuel Carney went slowly to the dying man. He had not failed to note the quick turn of the head with which Joe Macarthur had heard the name pronounced. And Carney, his brain reeling, crept slowly forward, feeling that if Macarthur was facing death, he himself was facing something which was far worse!

After all, how beautifully just it was—how ac-

curately destiny was dealing with him! On the very day when he had confessed his sin and when that confession had been rewarded, as he felt, with utter absolution, he was to stand beside a man who had been his unwilling victim and write down the words which were to damn himself forever in the eyes of the community.

For there was no mistaking the cruel satisfaction which sparkled now in the eyes of the dying man. He had been trapped and betrayed and now he should have the consummate satisfaction of betraying the traitor. Yet there was no drawing back for Carney. His gray face was set. He prepared to suffer the crucifixion.

After that night he could never face the rest of the world. But there was a short cut to a refuge. The gun in his house was staunch enough to send a bullet into his brain, and he could confidently leave the care of his wife and of his daughter to the great heart of Oscar Fern. They would not suffer. They could go East and change their ruined name for a new one.

"I got something to say," went on Joe Macarthur, "that'll give Sam Carney a lot of fun to write down."

He paused, and his wicked grin froze the very heart of the poor cashier.

"Come closer the rest of you," he commanded. "I want you to hear it—in case he ain't going to write it down—fast enough!"

They glided obediently closer.

"Put something under my head. It's hard to talk lying flat this way."

Again they obeyed.

"Whisky!"

A flask was instantly at his lips.

"Now I'm ready—"

Here he coughed violently, and again more weakly. A bloody bubble rose to his lips, broke, and he wiped away the red drops with the back of his hand. Then his arm dropped and hung limp down from the counter—a great long arm, so that the fingers actually touched the dust.

And it flashed through the mind of Carney that this moment the outlaw had actually come to death's door and that there would be no narrative.

But no, now he was speaking. His voice was low and hurried, but each word was perfectly distinct. If the stumbling pencil failed to record those words, a dozen ears would be ready to swear to them the next day.

"I ain't got much time. I got to hurry—I got to begin with the most important part of what I got to say."

He turned his head and rolled his eyes around the semicircle of faces.

"Is what I say going to be believed?"

There was a general nodding of heads. And an unaccustomed touch of mercy made some one step

closer and advise him that he had better save his strength and do no talking.

"To hell with that!" answered Macarthur with a faint shadow of his old sneer returning. "I got the life of another man on my hands. I got to get rid of it! So to start right there:

"It was me that killed Nichols and Springer. Gloster didn't have nothing to do with it. He wasn't at the mine. He was away hunting. When he came back and found the two of 'em dead, I guess he knew how folks would figure. That little old mine was opening up a rich vein. Everybody would of thought that he'd bumped off his two partners to get the whole thing into his hands!"

He rolled his eye around at the others, savagely challenging them.

"You'll be thinking that I'm saying that just because I know that I'm going to pass out and that I might as well save the neck of my bunkie while I'm about it. But, for God's sake, boys, believe what I'm saying. I'll tell you all the straight of it. I've been gunning for Gloster. But he's showed white clear through. There ain't no yaller in him.

"One thing more. He joined the gang. But he didn't join it for the money nor because he'd been hounded into going where he could get help ag'in half the sheriffs in the West out after his head. He joined because Joan Barry was up in the hills where we was hanging out, and he wanted to be near her. She's down there in the stable."

"A *girl?*" gasped the listeners faintly, for the starlight had been too dim and the speed of the black horse too great to enable them to distinguish anything definite about the rider in the saddle on the Captain.

"A girl, I say. And Buck Daniels is with her. He ain't had any part in this fracas. He come trailing Joan, and she come trailing us, most like."

"Is there *anybody* in that stable," asked the doctor dryly, "that's broken the law?"

"Dud Rainey," answered Macarthur. "God knows, Dud is square. But I got to tell the truth to save the rest. And every word I've spoken is the truth and the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

A great tremor passed through his body. He gasped. And then his eyes closed.

Surely, thought Carney in his agony, the man would die now. And out of his heart of hearts went up a prayer, wordless, and stronger than words, to the God of mercy, that he might be spared this worse than death.

"He's making a good end," said one of the watchers. "He's clearing off his slate. And if what he says is true, we'd ought to get Gloster and Daniels out of that mess safe and sound."

"If what he says is true!" added another significantly. "A mighty slim chance that it's true—Look—he's gone now—"

His voice died away, for the eyes of Macarthur had opened again.

"You lie," he breathed. "So help me God and everything holy—you lie! I've spoken the truth—Gloster is innocent—and—"

He coughed again, appeared to half strangle, and then went on speaking in a rapid, rattling whisper which the others could barely make out.

"Now I got one more thing to say. I'm going to tell you how come that I ran into this trap to-night. I'm going to tell you how five straight shooters and fast workers come to be butchered by a bunch of skunks and squareheads like you gents. Them five deaths, they go all to the account of one sneaking, double-crossing hound that'll go to hell fast on account of what he's done. And that man is—"

There was a sharp crackling of guns. In spite of themselves, the listeners started with an exclamation which drowned the name on the lips of Macarthur. And, before he could speak again, there was a loud noise like thunder near at hand, and then the entire town seemed to be shouting with one voice.

"They're breaking out!" cried one of the men. "They're gone! And we've missed it!"

A stampede started for the door, and in an instant the room was deserted. Even the doctor left, not that he wanted to be in the fight, but that he would be glad enough to be one of the first to arrive after the danger had passed.

There remained only the dying man and Samuel Carney. And the latter looked down into the dull eyes of Macarthur.

"You lucky dog—lucky—lucky!" whispered Macarthur.

"Listen to me," cried Carney eagerly. What mattered it to him that the rest of the town was in an uproar? He had only a few speeding seconds in which to attempt to clear himself with a man who was bound for another world.

"Listen to me, and try to believe me, Macarthur. I rode out there to warn you to-night. My nerve failed me to-day. I went out to the Thompson place this evening and waited for you. The trouble was that I got there hours too early. I waited, and while I was waiting I fell asleep. When I woke up, you'd gone by with your men. I lighted matches, and saw by the light the marks of the hoofs of your horses going down the trail.

"Then I jumped on my horse and rode like mad for Wickson. But nothing was any good. By the time I came in, guns were crackling. Macarthur, that's the truth. I'd taken out five hundred to pay you for the trouble you'd taken to work the deal through."

"If Rainey's taken, would you use that five hundred to clear him? Would you use it to hire a real lawyer to fight for his skin, Carney?"

"I would! I shall!"

"There ain't no use. They've butchered them all by this time! But—you wouldn't do it anyway. There ain't no truth in you, nothing but lies—nothing but lies! And me after what I've been

and after what I've done—to be took in by such a skunk as you!"

"Macarthur, if you'll—"

"Don't talk. I ain't got time to listen. There's other things. God, what a pile I got to think about! What a pile! Only—"

He paused.

"Is Gloster going to be safe?"

"And Daniels too, Macarthur! You've cleared them completely!"

"Thank God for that!"

Another pause.

Suddenly he started.

"Shoot low, boys, and shoot fast!" he cried aloud, and then dropped back with a thud upon the counter. This was the death of Joe Macarthur.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WHITE MAGIC

THE ray of light which struck through the darkness and among the trees was instantly lost again. Joan reined back the Captain to the spot from which she had first seen it, and there she made it out again, a steady yellow streak through the blackness. She located it carefully and then struck forward again.

All day she had been wandering on horseback since they had broken out of Wickson just before the dawn. But the stallion went up the slope as easily as if he had not done a day's work for a month.

She had taken care to approach the place stealthily. But now she rode straight in upon it, and there she found a very small fire which had been built in the center of a number of large boulders. There was no one beside it, neither were there any footprints, for there was nothing but rocks on which to step.

Yet she hesitated only an instant, and then called loudly: "Harry! Harry Gloster!"

There was no answer. She called again, and, since the silence continued, she sank down upon a

stone and, dropping her face upon her hands, gave herself over to the thoughts which had been riding with her all the day.

Then, for no reason, she looked up suddenly, and saw that Harry Gloster was standing before her. His rifle was in his hand. A bloodstained rag was tied around his face, and the face itself was pale and drawn, with something in it which she had never seen there before.

There was an unyielding hardness in his look—a gloomy desperation. But the blood and the bandage banished the smaller details, to her mind.

"Oh, Harry!" she cried. "They've hurt you!"

He looked down at her in wonder, as she arose; then he touched his head as if suddenly remembering of what she could be speaking.

"That's nothing. Just a nick."

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"And dad? Is he back there waiting? Didn't he recognize my voice? I want him here, too, before I tell you the great news!"

There was no answer from Harry Gloster. She waited another instant, and then his silence began to mean more than words.

"Harry!" she whispered. "What happened—where is he?"

"Where he can't answer you, Joan. But he left something for you that he said you'd never seen."

He took out a large oval locket, and handed it to her. She received it with trembling fingers.

"Tell me the whole truth," she pleaded.

"He rode on with the rest of us after we got out of Wickson. He said nothing about being hurt, but after we'd decided that each of us had better go his own way, and Rainey had gone off, I said good-bye to Buck, and noticed that he was riding shaky in the saddle. I sneaked along behind.

"As soon as he was beyond a hill he sort of fell out of the saddle—more like a fall than a getting off. He pulled off his coat. Then I saw what had happened and went up to him."

He paused.

"In the end," he concluded, "Buck wanted me to give you his love if I ever saw you again, and give you this pair of pictures."

She opened the locket, wiping away her fast falling tears to see what was inside. Within she found two pictures, one of a smiling girl enough like Joan to be her sister. But the fashion of her clothes was twenty years gone by, and she knew it was her mother, unhappy Kate Cumberland.

The opposite face was the strangest she had ever seen. It was that of a young man, with dark hair and eyes, a face spirit-thin and wonderfully handsome. His expression was good humored enough, but his lips were just a trifle compressed, and the nostrils seemed to be quivering. There was a suggestion about that face that the man would instantly leap into violent action.

She did not need to be told his name. It was

her father, Dan Barry, from the knowledge of whom she had been so carefully shielded through so many years. She closed the locket again, but still the two faces were burning themselves into her brain.

Her heart had softened when she looked at her mother; it had leaped when she saw Dan Barry at last. There was a strange feeling that he stood, with a gaze just as in the picture, directly behind her. And, indeed, she knew that something of him was still living in her own spirit.

She looked up to Harry Gloster again, and by his expression she knew that he had seen the resemblance also. That was why he stood so far from her.

"I came to tell dad," she said slowly, "that you and he are free. The whole countryside is buzzing with it. They've telephoned the news everywhere. Joe Macarthur, as he lay dying, made a full confession that showed you had nothing to do with the killing of Nichols and Springer, and that there was really no crime to charge to either of you. I came to tell you that you were both free, and now—"

He neither stirred nor spoke, but watched her with a cold and distant regard that froze up her power of speech. Fear was taking her by the throat.

"Harry," she whispered, "what has happened? Why do you look at me like that?"

"I saw Daniels die, Joan. He died for you. And I swore then that I'd never take a step to win you away from that wild freedom that you love. That's

your life and that's your happiness, and God pity the man that tries to step between you and it."

"But if I come to you, Harry, and tell you that I know how terrible and how foolish are the things I have done—"

"Joan, half a step toward me would mean—"

And so, suddenly, they were in each other's arms.

A wedge of wild geese, flying low, sent down their wavering and dissonant chorus, but Dan Barry's daughter did not hear.

THE END

